

# cineaction

ISSUE 92 • 2014

## politics + cinema



Post-Racial Fantasy,  
Superheroes and Empire

Che's Myth and Memory,  
Scandalous Hollywood

2013 Toronto International  
Film Festival







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*The Birth of a Nation*



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## Call for submissions

### CineAction n° 93: THE CITY & FILM

Film and urban theorists have noted the relationship between the development of the modern metropolis and the rise of the cinema, which remains a central component of modern urban culture. This issue will explore the continuing connection between the two and how it's expressed and continues to be relevant. The cinema has shaped ideas about reality and in turn, has influenced how certain cities are perceived producing a dynamic relationship between the social world and culture. Submissions can include the reading of a film dealing with a specific city such as New York or Paris or the city and genre films, the city as utopia or as nightmare, the destroyed city.

Papers should be submitted in hard copy and mailed to the address above to the attention of Florence Jacobowitz (fjacob@yorku.ca) or Richard Lippe (rlippe@yorku.ca), editors of this issue.

SUBMISSION DEADLINE FEBRUARY 1, 2014

### CineAction n° 94: LONG FORM DRAMA, SHORT SUBJECTS

"Long Form Drama" is a term coined to describe the recent shift of interest towards television series of high quality that many consider to have replaced the cinema as a locus of serious adult entertainment. Unfolding over multiple episodes, hours, and even years, these TV shows are seen to provide a content, often dark and difficult, and an innovative style that strain against the conventions of cinema as well as network television (they tend to be found on premium cable channels). Once considered a cultural wasteland—hence the pejorative nickname the 'boob tube' as TV came to be called in the nineteen sixties—television now attracts some of the best and most innovative writers, directors, and even actors. Additionally, we would like to include in this topic that body of theatrical film that unspools over three plus hours—a less commercially viable length once favored only by art film directors (and artists). Issue 94 welcomes papers that deal with all aspects of this phenomenon, from the general (e.g. historical technical, industrial, artistic, etc.) to the more specific (e.g. in-depth analyses of shows and films that come under this category).

A second complementary topic is "Short Subjects", an area of filmmaking rarely dealt with in critical circles. Most film writing and film criticism deals with feature length films, ignoring the large body of short films that have proliferated since the beginning of cinema. Culturally ignored and theatrically unfriendly, short films have been relegated to screenings at film festivals and art houses. However, the rise of the Internet as a venue for filmwatching, and posting of one's own films or favorites, has created an opening for renewed interest in the subject. Again, we welcome all approaches to this topic.

Papers in hard copy mailed to Susan Morrison (smorr@cineaction.ca), editor. Brief proposals, queries and submissions to:

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Front cover image: *The Blind Side*

Back cover image: *The Incredible Hulk*

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# Contributors

**Greg Burris** currently resides in Santa Barbara, California where he studies and writes about film and Culture. He wishes to dedicate this essay to his professor Cedric J. Robinson, who provides an exemplary model of what it means to be an academic and an activist.

**David Christopher** is currently an MA student in History in Art at the University of Victoria and will begin his PhD in January. David has published on both theatre and film in the U.K.'s *Theatre Notebook* and in the *Online International Journal of Arts and Humanities*.

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**Ajay Gehlawat** is Associate Professor of Theatre and Film at Sonoma State University. He is the author of *Reframing Bollywood: Theories of Popular Hindi Cinema* (2010) and, most recently, editor of *The Slumdog Phenomenon: A Critical Anthology* (2013).

**Florence Jacobowitz** teaches in the Departments of Humanities and Communications at York University

**Robert K. Lightning** is a writer and critic living and working in New York City. He is currently completing a book on the film *Brokeback Mountain*.

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**Richard Lippe** teaches film studies at York University. He is currently putting together a book of Robin Wood's writings.

**Tanner Mirrlees** teaches communication studies in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology. His research focus is the geopolitical-economy of U.S. empire and communications.

**Susan Morrison** has been an editor of *CineAction* since 1985.

**William Repass** is a recent graduate of Hendrix College, originally from Los Alamos, New Mexico. In addition to film criticism, he writes poetry and prose.

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**Patricia Varas**, Professor of Spanish and Latin American Studies at Willamette University, is the author of several books and has contributed many essays on Latin American cinema, modernity, literature and culture to different journals and edited volumes.



In this issue

# Politics & Cinema

This issue was organized around the relationship between politics and cinema. Politics and cinema was a foundational focus for film studies, from the theoretical/political manifesto of “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism” by *Cahiers du Cinema*, almost 50 years ago. All films are political, we learned. While that focus has shifted and diversified through many permutations and trends over the intervening decades, this magazine has been open to a range of emphases and perspectives, across filmmakers, genres, nations and historical periods. Political and ideological critique of Hollywood remains important and *CineAction* has a venerable history of political interpretation of the globally dominant industry. As we watch the remake of *Red Dawn* or another *Die Hard*, is Reaganite cinema, so memorably dissected by Andrew Britton, returning? Did it ever go away? Or consider the ‘Washington’ films, *Argo*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Lincoln* with their intimate connections to the American state and party politics. Obamate cinema? Robin Wood sharply categorized Hollywood’s Dominant Tendencies in the first issue of *CineAction*—exploring the dominant tendencies of contemporary Global Hollywood remains essential. The representational politics of gender, race and—the usually neglected—class are still crucial to politically minded critics and scholars. Of course, political militant filmmaking has been central to film history, from the Soviets to the historical avant-gardes to the Popular Front in France or Hollywood, to Third Cinema to political documentaries now. This history remains relevant and informs us still.

These broad interests attracted a large number of interesting submissions, ranging through film history and around the globe. Not all could be included but this issue features a range of perspectives and subjects that should interest and challenge new and old readers of *CineAction*.

Tanner Mirrlees gives us an incisive reading of *Iron Man* within the political economy of contemporary cultural industries and the American empire. William Repass closely examines space, style, ideology and gender politics in one of the most celebrated of political films, *The Battle of Algiers*. Marc Saint-Cyr explores Aki Kaurismäki’s empathetic commitment to the representation of the working class and the marginal throughout his career. Greg Burris dissects the contradictions of contemporary liberalism and “post-racial” ideology in *Blind Side*. Catherine Ann Collins and Patricia Varas consider *El día que me quieras* and its exploration of the famed final photographs of that most iconic of revolutionaries, Che. Michael Lipiner looks at contemporary superhero films and changing representation of minorities in Hollywood. Anne Crémieux casts back in Hollywood history at scandal, censorship and marketing. Ajay Gehlawat explains possibly historic changes in the representation of love and romance in contemporary Bollywood. Robert K. Lightning carefully compares two films on North American shooting massacres, *Polytechnique* and *Elephant*. Finally, David Christopher analyzes the quiet Canadian apocalypse of *Last Night*.

— SCOTT FORSYTH



## 2013 TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

Each year, we feature reviews of notable films at the Toronto International Film Festival. Editors Florence Jacobowitz, Richard Lippe and Susan Morrison present close interpretation of films that impressed them this year.

### BOB WILCOX

As our designer, Bob Wilcox has been an integral part of *CineAction* for more than two decades. He has kept us going through all those years with patience, wisdom, new ideas and new looks. We bid him thanks and farewell on his retirement and welcome Debi De Santis to *CineAction*. With this issue, Debi has introduced a re-design of the magazine. We hope you like it.





How to Read *Iron Man*

## The Economics, Geopolitics and Ideology of an Imperial Film Commodity

BY TANNER MIRRELES

*Iron Man* (2008) is a Hollywood film produced by Marvel Studios and distributed by Viacom-owned Paramount Pictures. Based on the Cold War-era Marvel comic by the same name, the film is about Tony Stark (Robert Downey, Jr.), a multi-millionaire engineer whose Stark Industries (inherited from his father) researches, develops and sells weapons technologies to the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD). In the opening scene, Stark is escorted to U.S.-occupied Afghanistan by a friendly DOD liaison, Lieutenant Colonel James Rhodes (Terrence Howard). There, Stark demonstrates the killing power of a new commercialized weapon system (the "Jericho Missile") but is soon after ambushed and taken captive in a cave by a jihadist group called The Ten Rings. Stark is almost killed by IED shrapnel, which is lodged close to his heart. But Yinsen, Stark's fellow captive, saves him by grafting an electromagnet into Stark's chest to keep the shrapnel from reaching his heart. The terrorist leader Raza then forces Stark and Yinsen to make weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) for them from the cave. But instead of doing so, they engineer an electric generator (the arc reactor) and a weaponized armoured battle-suit, which Stark uses to escape. Yinsen is killed, but Stark fights his way to freedom and is then rescued by the DOD, which takes him back to the U.S. There,

Stark announces that he will no longer sell WMDs, but Obadiah Stane, the manager of Stark Industries, advises him against this decision. To his dismay, Stark learns that the weapons Stark Industries sells are being used by the Ten Rings to kill peasant Afghanis and also, that Stane wants to cut him out of Stark Industries. Stark engineers a new weaponized armour suit, flies back to Afghanistan, kills the terrorists and saves the Afghani villagers. Pepper Potts (Gwyneth Paltrow), Stark's assistant, discovers that Stane supplied the Ten Rings with WMDs and also, hired the terrorist group to kill Stark. At the film's climax, Stark battles Stane (who dons his own battle-suit) atop his Stark Industries and defeats him with a massive energy blast. The film ends with Stark revealing his super-hero identity to the press.

*Iron Man* was made in a world system in which the U.S. is the dominant imperial power. Since at least WWII, the U.S. state and U.S. corporations have struggled to rule markets across territories by building, promoting and policing a world system of states that share the U.S.'s core features: the capitalist mode of production, the liberal democratic state form, and the consumerist "way of life." The U.S. fights for "hegemony" in the world system through the incorporation of others, using strategies of coercion and ideological persuasion, brute force and consent building. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the U.S. continues to be a dominant imperial power, economically, militarily and media-culturally. The U.S.



economy is three times the size of the world's next largest, Japan. With only 4.6% of the world population, the U.S. accounts for about 27.5% of the world's total Gross Domestic Product (GDP). *Iron Man* exists in a world in which U.S.-based corporations are backed by the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD)—the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Coast Guard—which controls more than half a million troops, is equipped with nearly half of the world's total weapons and has more than eight hundred and sixty five military bases in more than forty foreign countries. *Iron Man* is also part of globalizing Hollywood, major film companies that are located in Los Angeles, California, but have business operations that encircle the planet. Hollywood studios, distribution networks and exhibition platforms are largely controlled by six U.S.-based transnational media conglomerates (TNMCs): the Walt Disney Company, Comcast-NBC-Universal, News Corporation, Viacom, Time-Warner and Sony Entertainment of America. TNMC-controlled Hollywood exerts asymmetrical influence over the internal structure, ownership patterns, distribution and exhibition process and standards of film of other national film industries without proportionate reciprocation of influence by them. Hollywood's worldwide box office revenues climbed in 2011 to \$32.6 billion and in 2012, rose even higher to \$34.7 billion.<sup>1</sup> Hollywood adds nearly \$180 billion to the U.S. economy each year and sustains a near one-way flow of film commodities between the U.S. and other countries. Hollywood TNMCs control the property rights to the top 30 all-time worldwide highest grossing films and in 2012, Hollywood made all of the top ten highest grossing films: *The Avengers*, *Skyfall*, *The Dark Knight Rises*, *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, *Ice Age: Continental Drift*, *The Twilight Saga*, *The Amazing Spider-Man*, *Madagascar 3*, and *The Hunger Games*. In terms of its economic size, military preponderance and cultural power, the U.S. is an Empire.

In this article, I argue that *Iron Man* is one small but important part of the U.S. Empire. While much has been made of *Iron Man*'s spectacle as Hollywood entertainment media, this article examines how *Iron Man* is shaped by and supportive of the economic, military and ideological power of the U.S. Empire. I argue that *Iron Man* supports U.S. economic power (as a Hollywood blockbuster and synergistic franchise), U.S. military power (as DOD-Hollywood co-produced militainment) and cultural power (as a national and global relay for U.S. imperial ideologies). The nexus of the actual world of U.S. Empire and the reel world of Hollywood film expressed by *Iron Man* highlights how popular film is not "just entertainment" that circulates in apolitical theatre markets, but is linked to and supportive of the geopolitical-economy and ideology of the U.S. Empire. Combining the political-economy of communications and critical cultural studies methods, I explore the nexus of the U.S. security state, Hollywood and film so as to

critically interpret *Iron Man* with respect to the broad economic, geopolitical and ideological forces and relations that shape it.

### **The Economic Power of *Iron Man*: A Synergistic Blockbuster for the Walt Disney Company**

*Iron man* is a blockbuster film and synergistic franchise that supports the U.S. Empire's economic power by extending Hollywood's global market dominance, adding to the Walt Disney Company's profits and perpetuating the class power of Robert I. Ager, Disney's CEO, Chairman and major shareholder.

Like all blockbuster films, *Iron Man* was made with a big budget (\$140,000,000) with the goal of making Hollywood as much money as possible. To cultivate consumer demand for this film and attract viewers to theatres, Marvel Studios and Paramount Pictures mass marketed *Iron Man* using in-cinema previews, TV ad spots (one during halftime of Super Bowl XLII), ads in newspapers and on billboards, buses, benches and websites, soft news interviews with actors, tie-ins at thousands of 7-Eleven stores and Burger King chains and via social media platforms like Facebook. After creating global hype, buzz and intrigue, Paramount Pictures mass-released *Iron Man* to theatres worldwide. Between April 14, 2008 and May 14, 2008, the *Iron Man* commodity flowed across and was consumed in eighty countries including Argentina, Brazil, China, Germany, Estonia, Iceland, India, Israel Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Pakistan, Russia, South Africa, Ukraine, the United Arab Emirates and Vietnam. As *Iron Man* crossed the borders of these and other countries, the title was translated or dubbed into local languages. In Argentina, *Iron Man* became *El Hombre de hierro*; in Brazil, *Homem de Ferro*; in Estonia, *Raudmees*; in Greece, *O atsalenios anthropos*; in Japan, *Aian Man*; in Russia, *Железный человек*, in Vietnam, *Nguoi Sat*. *Iron Man*'s box office returns quadrupled the amount the film cost to make. Overall, *Iron Man* took a total of \$585.2 million: \$318.4 at the "North American" box office (54.5% of the total) and \$266.8 million at the worldwide box office (45.6% of the total).<sup>2</sup> *Iron Man*'s production budget was approximately \$140 million, meaning the film generated a little more than \$445 million at the box office. This box office return made *Iron Man* the 89<sup>th</sup> highest grossing worldwide film of all time and set in motion Marvel Studios' production of *Iron Man 2* (2010) (the 74<sup>th</sup> highest grossing worldwide film of all time) and *Iron Man 3* (2013), the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest grossing film of all time. Clearly, *Iron Man* contributed to Hollywood's global market dominance.

In addition to being a global blockbuster, *Iron Man* is a synergistic entertainment franchise, designed to generate as much revenue for its owners as possible, not only through the accumulation of box office receipts, but also, through the sale of ancillary commodities. At the core

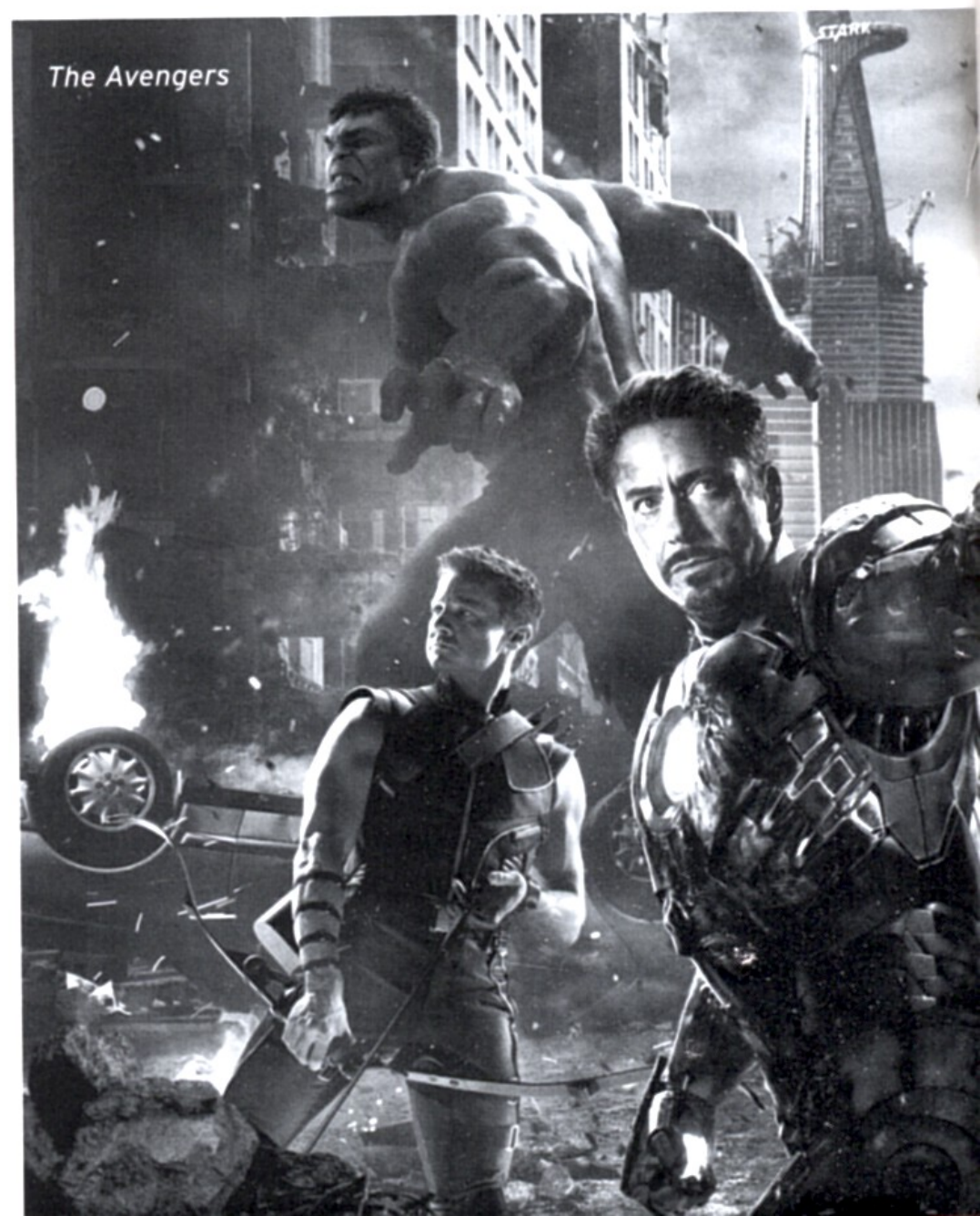


of the *Iron Man* franchise is the comic book (stories and characters), which prior to the film, already had a big fan base and whose “high concept” was widely recognized by people. Spreading from the core of the *Iron Man* concept are brand extensions that expand a consumable *Iron Man* experience through commodities, screens, platforms and stores. Accompanying the “pre-sold” release of the *Iron Man* film to the world was a CD soundtrack (composed by Ramin Djawadi, an *Iron Man* fan) and an *Iron Man* Video game (published by Sega and released on Playstation 3, Xbox 360, Playstation 2, Playstation Portable, Nintendo DS, Wii, and PCs). In the lead up to and following this multi-platform release, *Iron Man* merchandise (action figures, coffee mugs, T-shirts, candy, trading cards) was sold by retailers at shopping malls around the world. Four months following its theatrical release, *Iron Man* DVDs and Blue-ray discs started filling the shelves of more retailers and rental stores and soon after, the film was licensed to broadcast and cable TV networks and pay-per-view providers in the U.S. and elsewhere, generating even more revenue for *Iron Man*’s owners. To generate long-term engagement with the *Iron Man* brand, Marvel Studios built an *Iron Man* Web site that invites users to interactively “learn more” about the film, read character profiles, view stills, watch preview trailers, sign up to receive emails, deals and “insider info” and download desktop *Iron Man* themed wallpaper, screensavers and skins. The website uses its users to extend the *Iron Man* brand through their own lives, bodies and screens and also, uses its users’ creativity and love of the story and characters to generate *Iron Man* fan art, which it co-opts and showcases to add further value to the overall franchise. *Iron Man* is not just a blockbuster, but a synergistic entertainment property designed to move consumers from medium to medium, commodity to commodity, transaction to transaction. With each user gaze, click, move, download and turn, additional revenue is generated for *Iron Man*’s owners.

While spinning out branded commodities based upon itself, the *Iron Man* also cross-promotes brands for other products. Hollywood has been fused with branding and the result is “branded entertainment”: films that try to cultivate goodwill for brands by associating them with the positive attributes of scripted protagonists. *Iron Man* is an example of branded entertainment. For example, after battling his way out of an Afghan cave and crash landing in an Afghan desert, Stark talks about longing for “a real American cheeseburger”. In the next scene, Stark has been rescued from Afghanistan, returned to the U.S. and has had his appetite sated by Burger King, whose Whopper wrapper he dangles in the face of journalists at a press conference. *Iron Man* celebrates the liberation of Stark from Afghan terrorists, but places its own viewers in a cage of corporate brand culture: Pepper Potts drives an Audi; Stark uses a Mac computer and reads *Vanity Fair*, *Rolling Stone* and *Wired* magazines; other

characters fashion Bulgari watches, LG phones and Dell computers.

Though *Iron Man* made money for Marvel Studios and Paramount Pictures in 2008, since 2009, the film has been exploited as a revenue source by the Walt Disney Company, which acquired *Iron Man* from Marvel Studios in 2009 by merging this studio into its ownership portfolio. Since mid-1990s, Marvel Studios had operated as a semi-independent production company that made and licensed content for the majors. Marvel Studios generated revenue by making TV shows and films based on the content of its comic book collection and then selling distribution rights to these media commodities to bigger conglomerates. It also licensed the film production rights to comics like *The Avengers*, *Daredevil*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Iron Man*, *The Fantastic Four*, *Spider-Man*, *X-Men* to bigger studios, which developed them into films and then sold the distribution rights to other companies, which rented them to theatre chains and other exhibitors. Noticing the popular appeal and box of returns accruing to Marvel comic book films like *X-Men*, *The Incredible Hulk* and *Iron Man*, the Walt Disney Company launched a takeover of the company. On August 31, 2009, the Walt Disney Company bought Marvel Studios and with it, an archive of at least 5,000 comic book characters, each a potential source of a new synergistic franchise to be spread, cross-promoted and sold across films, TV series, video games, toys, rides and more. The Walt Disney Company’s CEO, Robert A. Iger, said that by buying Marvel, he gained control of a “treasure trove” of intellectual property and that this





comic world offered “so many opportunities to mine [for value] both characters that are known and characters that are not widely known”.<sup>3</sup> Stan Lee, Marvel’s founder, enthused that the Walt Disney and Marvel convergence would “be extremely beneficial to both companies” and be a “perfect synergy”.<sup>4</sup> This synergy has served the Walt Disney Company well, as it has made Marvel characters into two of the world’s top five highest grossing films of all time: *The Avengers* (#3) and *Iron Man 3* (#5). The Walt Disney Company’s Marvel feature films, including *Iron Man*, contribute to its annual revenue. In 2012, the Walt Disney Company generated \$42.3 billion in revenue, a sum greater than the combined 2012 GDP of the world’s six poorest countries: the Democratic Republic of the Congo (17.87 billion), Liberia (1.767 billion), Zimbabwe (\$10.81 billion), Burundi (2.472 billion), Eritrea (3.092 billion) and the Central African Republic (2.139 billion). Moreover, the Walt Disney Company’s control of *Iron Man* supports the class power of Robert A. Iger, Disney’s Chairman, Chief Executive Office (CEO) and holder of 1,159,675 Disney shares. In 2007, Fortune magazine ranked Iger as one of the “25 Most Powerful People in Business” and he is one of the top ten highest paid people in the U.S. In 2011, Iger took home \$28 million.

In sum, *Iron Man* supports the economic power of the U.S. Empire by sustaining the global market dominance of Hollywood and its cross-border trade in blockbuster films, synergistically cross-promoting itself and other U.S. commodities through itself and other derivative goods, and generating revenue for the Walt Disney Company and its U.S. ruler and owner, Iger.

## The Military Power of *Iron Man*:

### The DOD-Hollywood Complex and Militainment

In addition to supporting U.S. economic power, *Iron Man* supports the U.S. Empire’s military power as a form of DOD-Hollywood complex “militainment” that serves DOD public relations goals (PR).

The DOD-Hollywood complex refers to the symbiotic (mutually beneficial) relationships between the DOD and Hollywood studios which encourage the production of films which glorify militarism as a way of life. For the past hundred years, the DOD has supported the business of Hollywood and many Hollywood war films have aligned with the DOD’s use of PR to engineer public support for militarism and state violence. DOD-Hollywood complex militainment is designed to make the DOD look good and to make Hollywood money. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the DOD controls a centralized Hollywood liaison office that links every branch of the DOD. Headed by Phil Strub and located in the Pentagon, Washington, D.C., the Department of Defense Special Assistant for Entertainment Media (DODSAEM) is the “go to” place for Hollywood studios that wish to produce war films with the DOD. The Army’s Hollywood liaison is called the Office of Army Chief of Public Affairs; the Navy’s is called the Navy Office of Information West; the Air Force’s is the Office of Public Affairs-Entertainment Liaison Office; the Marine Corps’ is the Public Affairs Motion Picture and Television Liaison; the Coast Guard’s is called the Motion Picture and TV Office.

The DODSAEM, a DOD-film policy agency, grants war filmmakers access to military locations (bases, barracks, battlefields), personnel (U.S. officers and soldiers), software (knowledge about military protocol, chain of command, systems operation, troop lingo, drill routines), and most importantly, hardware (actual battle-ships, jet fighters, tanks, helicopters and guns), so long as their war scripts meet DOD content requirements. Hollywood war scripts that promote the DOD’s image to the public, cast the DOD in a positive light, align with DOD policy objectives and link with the DOD’s ongoing recruitment efforts tend to get DOD support while those that fail to meet these content stipulations, do not. Since 9/11, the DOD has helped Hollywood studios make a number of blockbuster war films such as *Pearl Harbor* (2001), *Enemy At the Gates* (2001), *Black Hawk Down* (2001), *Bad Company* (2002), *Behind Enemy Lines* (2002), and *Windtalkers* (2002), *Transformers* (2007), *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009). *Iron Man* is thus one among many examples of DOD-Hollywood complex militainment. The DODSAEM supported *Iron Man*’s production by linking Marvel Studios to the U.S. Air Force, which turned its Edwards Air Force Base into a Hollywood set piece for three days of shooting. The Air Force allowed Marvel Studios to cast over one hundred Airmen as extras in the film, flew its F-22 Raptor aircraft for the camera to help Marvel create high altitude action





combat sequences, provisioned helicopters, Humvees and jumbo jets, and even let its service-people act in the film. Technical Sergeant Thoshiya Jones played a pilot; Second Lieutenant Carsten Stahr played an Army special operations soldier; and Staff Sergeant Joe Gambles of the 31<sup>st</sup> Test and Evaluation Squadron acted as Air Force pilot in a scene with Rhodie. “No other Air Force base has this opportunity”, enthused Gambles. “We’re near Hollywood and we work with Hollywood all the time”.<sup>5</sup> The Air Force also supported *Iron Man*’s production by giving acting lessons to Terrence Howard by embedding him on its base and letting him observe, train with and learn about the way the Air Force operates and communicates.

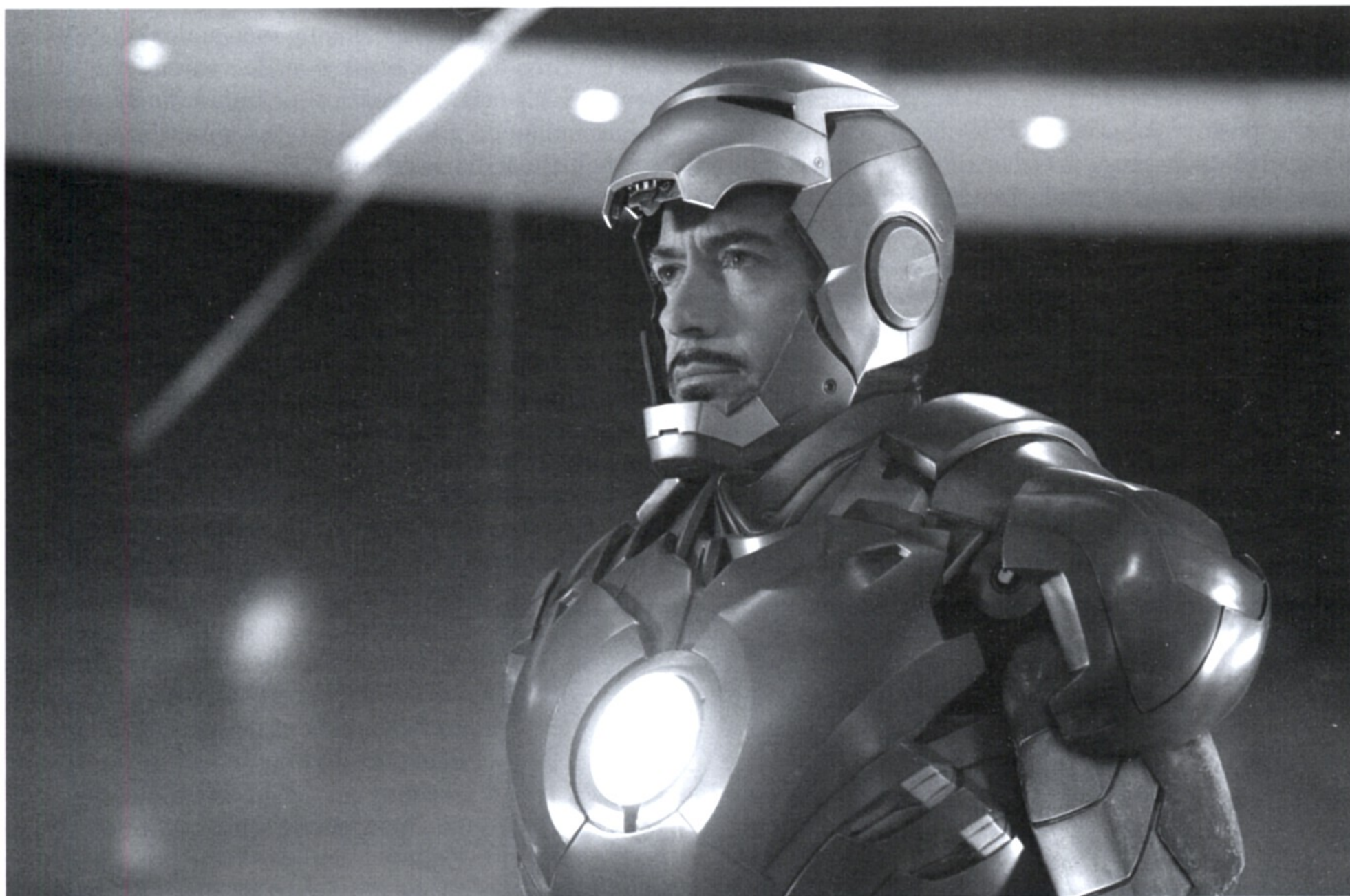
By working with the Air Force, Marvel Studios saved on production costs (associated with acquiring and flying an F-22 Raptor, paying extras to play as soldiers, renting locations to shoot and more). For director Jon Favreau, his DOD-Hollywood synergy also enhanced the “realism” of *Iron Man*: “This is the best back lot you could ever have. Every angle you shoot is authentic: desert, dry lake beds, hangars”. The Air Force is full of “tremendous professionals”, he said. “Every background performer is a bit of technical advisor. So there’s a plethora of information available to you.” The Air Force was happy to help Favreau make *Iron Man* seem “realistic”, so long as its comic book fantasy helped promote a positive image of itself to the public and to the world. Master Sergeant Larry Belen described *Iron Man*’s contribution to Air Force PR: “I want people to walk away from this movie with a really good impression of the Air Force, like they got about the Navy seeing *Top Gun*.” Air Force Captain Christian Hodge, *Iron Man*’s DOD Project Officer, said the film was also “good for [troop] morale” as it made its airmen look “like rock stars”. Furthermore, the Air Force chose to help Marvel Studios make *Iron Man* because it believed the character Rhodie conveyed its key values. According to Lt. Colonel Stephen Clutter, the Air Force Entertainment Liaison Office director, “The character of Rhodes reflects our warrior ethos and the professionalism that is so important to our Air Force culture”.<sup>6</sup> Clutter continued: “Mr. Howard worked very hard to ensure Airmen would be proud of his character. [...] We’re also proud of the fact that the airman battle uniform made its Hollywood debut in the film”.

In addition to serving Air Force PR goals, *Iron Man* promotionally interfaces with the DOD’s attempt to make a cyborg-soldier suit capable of enhancing the strength, speed, security and intellect of U.S. war-fighters. Since the 1990s, DOD proponents of a revolution in military affairs (RMA) have argued that information and communication technologies (ICTs) are transforming war and that the DOD must prepare itself to fight 21<sup>st</sup> century Network Centric Warfare (NCW) by integrating ICTs into every facet of what it does and networking its soldiers with weapon systems and the hardware

and software of the information age: computers, mobile devices, the World Wide Web.<sup>7</sup> The DOD also strives to enhance the physical, cognitive and sensorial powers of its soldiers by equipping them with combinations of ICTs, artificial intelligence (AI) supports, augmented reality interfaces (ARIs) and wearable exoskeletons. To generate buzz about these “cyborg-soldier” R&D projects, the DOD is linking them to the *Iron Man* film. Since *Iron Man*’s debut, DOD-sponsored university researchers and defense companies have been “working to turn *Iron Man* fiction into real technology”.<sup>8</sup> As the military analyst Max Boot says, the DOD is designing suits that aim to “give ordinary mortals many of the attributes of comic book superheroes”.<sup>9</sup> At the University of Utah and the University Berkeley, for example, DARPA-funded researchers say they aim to create an “Iron Man” suit that would “protect soldiers in combat by giving them increased strength and endurance”.<sup>10</sup> At MIT, the Army-supported Future Force Warrior project intends to make *Iron Man* into a new innovation. U.S. journalists have echoed this excitement, simultaneously promoting the *Iron Man* film and the DOD’s cyborg-soldier R&D. The Popular Science magazine story “Building the Real *Iron Man*”, forwards the headline: “While audiences flood theaters this month to see the comic-book-inspired *Iron Man*, a real-life mad genius toils in a secret mountain lab to make the mechanical superhuman more than just fantasy.”<sup>11</sup> A September 10, 2012 CNNMoney news segment avers: “*Iron Man* is a prized military asset in the movie, the ultimate soldier. Hollywood styles it as futuristic fantasy, but decades of research, development and considerable investment have made bionic technology a reality”.<sup>12</sup> A Slate video declares “Yes, the U.S. Military is Building real *Iron Man* suits”<sup>13</sup> while a YouTube video says “US Army test real life *Iron Man* exoskeleton”.<sup>14</sup>

These stories and videos promote the idea that the suit worn by Stark in *Iron Man* has become or one day will become a reality, and this is what the DOD hopes will one day happen. *Iron Man* offers the DOD’s researchers a way to promote their cyborg-soldier R&D to the public and also, a fictional model to inspire their present-day prototypes. The *Iron Man* suit and MIT’s Future Force Warrior prototype, for example, have much in common. In addition to being battery powered, they are equipped with flexible armor that protects the wearer’s body from bullet fire, Heads Up Display Units (HUDs) that extend the wearer’s vision across many screens and tactical imaging systems, ear-pieces that extend the wearer’s hearing through global telecommunication systems, physiological monitoring devices that record and track wearer’s heart rate, temperature and hydration, and a variety of personalized impact-heavy but physically light weapons systems the wearer can kill with. Like Stark’s *Iron Man* suit, the actual suits being designed by the DOD are designed to augment or enhance the wearer’s experience of reality so they may more effectively and





efficiently defend America and attack its enemies. The *Iron Man* film sequences which show off the military capabilities of Stark's suit not only prefigure the DOD's cyborg-soldier, but also, encourage viewers to expect a future of cyborgian soldier warfare ruled by the U.S. By doing this, *Iron Man* normalizes a future that is yet to be while cultivating public compliance with present-day DOD expenditure on R&D that aims to make *Iron Man*'s cyborgian weapons system real.

In sum, *Iron Man* serves the U.S. DOD as a form of DOD-Hollywood militainment that glorifies the Air Force and promotes the military-industrial-academic-complex's R&D on cyborg-soldier weapons technology.

### **The Cultural Power of *Iron Man*: The Imperial Ideology of the *Iron Man* Text**

*Iron Man* gives cultural and ideological support to the U.S. Empire by affirming post-9/11 U.S. foreign policy in Afghanistan, U.S. exceptionalism, and a distinctly U.S. military-industrial-complex (MIC).

Following 9/11, the U.S. launched an invasion and prolonged occupation of Afghanistan, a country from which Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda allegedly planned and orchestrated the 9/11 attacks. *Iron Man* supports the U.S. state's post-9/11 foreign policy in Afghanistan by depicting it as a space of threat to America, a space that

must be contained and controlled with military might. In the film's opening scene, Stark is being toured around Afghanistan by the DOD and is then ambushed by the Ten Rings jihadist terrorist group, which kills U.S. soldiers and nearly kills Stark. By representing Afghanistan as a place full of fanatical terrorists that wish to kill Americans and conquer the region, the film affirms the U.S.'s post-9/11 occupation of this country. Moreover, *Iron Man*, like the Bush Administration, contends that proper response to the terrorist threat is violence, not diplomacy. In an early scene, Stark demonstrates the destructive power of his Jericho missile to the DOD: "They say the best weapon is one you never have to fire. I respectfully disagree. I prefer the weapon you only have to fire once. That's how dad did it, that's how America does it, and it's worked out pretty well so far" says Stark. "Find an excuse to let one of these off the chain and I personally guarantee you the bad guys won't want to come out of their caves." Stark then launches the Jericho at an Afghan mountain. Stark and the DOD are delighted and viewers are invited to enjoy the spectacle of Afghan caves and terrorists being obliterated by U.S. WMDs. In another scene, Stark escapes the Afghan cave-prison and uses his new suit to pummel terrorists and smash them into cave walls while incinerating them with a flamethrower. In these and other scenes, *Iron Man* gives popular support to the post-9/11 U.S. state's violence in Afghanistan.



In addition to glorifying violence as the proper U.S. state response to terrorism, *Iron Man* intersects with and perpetuates post-9/11 nation-making processes that construct a positive American self by distinguishing it from a negative Arab-Muslim Other. For over one-hundred years, Hollywood has made Orientalist films that define America by othering Arabs and Muslims as “heartless, brutal, uncivilized, religious fanatics”.<sup>15</sup> *Iron Man* participates in this process. In *Iron Man* by casting the majority of Arabs and Muslims as villainous terrorists set against the heroic American Stark. The terrorists are dumb while Stark is a genius (Stark is able to make the first *Iron Man* suit while under the surveillance of the terrorists, who don’t understand what he’s doing). The terrorists are emotional and lack the scientific knowledge required to engineer weapons while Stark is rational, possesses scientific knowledge and can innovate weapons in a short

attacks an Afghan village, killing men and taking women and children hostage. Stark is made aware of this by the news, which says “no political or international pressure means no hope for [Afghan] refugees and villagers—who will help them?” Stark decides that he is the only one that can help, so dons his new suit for the first time, flies to Afghanistan and destroys the Ten Rings, saving the poor and helpless good Afghans from the bad terrorist ones. *Iron Man* thereby gives popular credence to the post-9/11 liberal imperialist idea that the U.S. has a responsibility, obligation or mission to use its military power liberate or save other peoples living in other countries that are suffering from some kind of oppression. As an allegorical figure of the U.S. state, *Iron Man*’s protagonist Stark personifies the U.S.’s exceptionalist state and the post-9/11 state of exception. To secure America, Stark must play by his own rules and pursue goals he deems just, free of external constraints on his power.

*Iron Man* also promotes the existence of a distinctly U.S. military-industrial-complex in the guise of a critique of it. Hollywood studios often take account of the problems of the time and incorporate some of the potentially explosive and resonant political issues of the day when scripting films, opening some space in film texts for liberal, sometimes even radical, criticism of the world. While *Iron Man* addresses some of the anxieties viewers may have about the U.S. MIC, it efficiently defuses them. In an early scene, a female journalist accuses Stark of being a “war profiteer” but Stark deflects this label by saying that “peace means having a bigger stick than the bad guys” and that Stark Industries and the DOD’s expenditure on weapons R&D “helped defeat the Nazis”. Here, the MIC is represented as an “arsenal of democ-

racy”, something that serves world peace. Stark further deracinates the journalist’s questions by seducing her, having sexual intercourse with her and then allowing his servant Pepper Potts, who proudly claims to do “anything and everything for Mr. Stark”, to call the journalist “trash” as she takes her out of Stark’s mansion the morning after. *Iron Man* addresses and then silences criticisms of the MIC by allowing its super-hero to outwit, penetrate and then humiliate a caricature of a liberal-minded female journalist. *Iron Man* also addresses post-9/11 fears that U.S. weapons corporations are selling weapons to terrorist groups that use these weapons to kill non-U.S. civilians and U.S. soldiers. A terrorist calls Stark “the most famous mass murderer in the history of America”, noting how Stark Industry sells weapons that fuel violent

period of time with limited resources. The terrorists are passive consumers of U.S. weapons technology; Stark Industries is the seller. While *Iron Man* perpetuates the post-9/11 stereotype of Arabs and Muslims as bad and inferior Others to define a good and superior American self, the film does depict some Arab-Muslim characters as good and intelligent, but not quite as good or intelligent as Stark. Yinsen, Stark’s friend, designs the technology that keeps Stark alive. But Stark improves upon this technology upon his return to the U.S. Yinsen even sacrifices himself to save Stark’s life, perhaps perceiving Stark to be more integral to scientific progress than he is. Other “good” Muslim characters appear in the film, but they are cast in passive, weak and dependent roles, in need of U.S. military help. In one scene, the Ten Rings





conflicts between peoples in his “part of the world.” Stark is shocked to discover that there is some truth in this claim, as Stark Industries manufactured the ‘Ten Rings’ entire weapons supply, including the shrapnel bomb that nearly killed him. At a press conference in the U.S., Stark says that while in Afghanistan, he “saw Americans killed by the very weapons I created to protect them. And I saw that I had become part of a system that had become comfortable with zero accountability”. In response to this discovery, Stark attempts to close down the weapons manufacturing division of Stark Industries, but this leads to a conflict with Obadiah Stane, whose main goal is to please the firm’s shareholders and Wall Street. When Stark fails to step back or step down from Stark Industries, Stane goes into a rage, dons the behemoth Iron Monger suit and tries to kill Stark, but is defeated.

*Iron Man* addresses worries that the U.S. MIC is controlled by greedy CEOs, who, motivated by profit, make and sell weapons to whoever will buy them (including the U.S.’s terrorist enemies). The potential of this framing of the U.S. MIC to become a structural critique of militarized capitalism, however, is not realized. *Iron Man* individualizes the MIC in Stark and Stane. Stark is a well-intentioned but naïve war profiteer who is oblivious to the harm his company causes until feeling and seeing this harm up close. Stane is a callous and realist minded war profiteer who is aware that the weapons he makes and sells kill people, but he only cares about the bottom line. *Iron Man*’s division of the MIC into individuals—a good war profiteer (Stark) and a bad one (Stane)—obscures how the system of capitalist-imperialism relies on near permanent war and the MIC. The film implies there are a few bad apples that need to be removed from the MIC, but the system which needs it is fine. Furthermore, *Iron Man* tries to placate concerns about the MIC with a plea for state regulation and by pushing the idea that the DOD should be the exclusive consumer of its weapons. Having realized that a global free-market in weapons and the free use of any weapons by anyone threaten the U.S. and its allies, Stark, by the end of the narrative, concedes to work with the U.S. state, thereby legitimizing its claim to the monopoly of physical violence. *Iron Man*’s potential for critique of the MIC slides into an argument for a distinctly U.S. MIC and affirms the need for a firm structural alliance between the DOD, U.S. weapons companies and military-minded engineers. *Iron Man* does not call for the abolishment of corporate weapons manufacture, but for regulations that make sure the U.S.’s war profiteers only sell their commodities to the U.S. state. *Iron Man* is not opposed to corporations prospering by selling weapons to the DOD or the DOD using such weapons to kill non-Americans; it is against profiteering by selling weapons to non-U.S. state and non-state actors that might use these commodities to kill Americans. Overall, it is a popular affirmation of the U.S. Empire’s military-industrial-complex.

## Conclusion

This article’s analysis of the geopolitical-economic conditions and text of *Iron Man* show how the capitalist accumulation logics of global Hollywood intersect with the strategic, promotional and ideological imperatives of the U.S. state, the DOD in particular. Although Hollywood and the DOD are not “fused” and Hollywood studios and the DOD are different kinds of organizations, this difference does not mean there is never any symbiotic interaction between the two. Though Hollywood and the DOD are motivated by different priorities, *Iron Man*—a new imperial film commodity—illustrates how economic and geopolitical interests interact and intertwine in support of the U.S. Empire and the broader culture of U.S. imperialism. *Iron Man* is part and product of the global market dominance of Hollywood, the DOD’s promotional and R&D goals and imperial ideology. As the Walt Disney Company’s *Iron Man* franchise flies across borders through various commodity platforms and brand extensions, it may, in addition to helping global Hollywood profit-maximize, elicit trans-national identification with an imagined U.S. community and shore up popular support for an expanding but always contested U.S. Empire.

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# Towards a Revolutionary Space

BY WILLIAM REPASS

"I make the revolution;  
therefore I exist."

— Solanas & Getino, from "Towards a Third Cinema."<sup>1</sup>

For Solanas and Getino, the *cogito* in its conventional form is dead to posterity. Descartes' simple utterance, "I think, therefore I am," has long since withered to an obsolete cliché. Yet we still find this formula propping up an entire ideology with its corpse, though the bones be picked clean. The tradition of Western humanism and its various appendages—the subject, rational thought, realism, capitalism—depend on an axiom that turns doubt into presumption: "if this is all I can be sure of, that I exist, then the world must exist for my benefit." According to Berger, this convention also informs a way of seeing, a distinct perspective. From the Renaissance forward, visual art tends to center the individual spectator in its approach to composition. In turn, the neoclassical artwork lays itself out in the easiest, most recognizable format, as if it were reality. Whether it be a painting or a film makes little difference; the spectator's role is neither to confront nor reciprocate—merely to consume.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the art relegates its spectator to play the part of Narcissus, the first cinephile, staring fixedly at his own reflection. But reflecting is no longer enough. Our continued existence requires a massive movement of bodies, a collective political act.

Which is why Solanas and Getino's rewording of the *cogito* is so significant. Their version sets up a contingent ideology (no longer foundational, since it takes its stance in relation to the original formulation), that functions as a staging-point from which radical filmmakers begin to mobilize against First Cinema—that is, any film-industry based on the Hollywood model of reiterating bourgeois

values as a vision of reality.<sup>3</sup> Working from this revolutionary footing, Solanas and Getino's counter-ideology situates Third Cinema in direct opposition to the hermetic narratives and passive spectatorship engendered by Hollywood's treatment of cinematic space. In order to actuate the revolution as such, Third Cinema must employ the camera so as to unveil the spatio-ideological apparatus of First Cinema, and in so doing, continually reinvent cinematic space.

The "makeover" sequence from *The Battle of Algiers* (Pontecorvo, 1966), in which three Algerian women disguise themselves as *pied-noirs* to the beat of martial drums, in preparation for acts of sabotage against French cultural targets, typifies Third Cinema's two-fold impulse to reveal and re-imagine cinematic space. By applying Mulvey and Baudry's readings of the Lacanian mirror-stage to the sequence, in addition to Benjamin's discussion of fragmentation in the film-actor's performance, the following shot-by-shot analysis will expose how Pontecorvo's camera constructs these new spaces to look at, and look from.

The sequence begins with a disorienting cut away from a crowded exterior space (in medium shot) to an intimate interior space (in canted close-up), modeling Eisenstein's principle of dialectical montage: the placement of conflicting images side by side to involve the spectator in an act of synthesis. By citing Eisenstein, Morra and Serandrei's editing allies itself with a revolutionary precedent in film-technique, prompting spectators to critically engage with the sequence as it unfolds. Meanwhile, the close-up isolates the face of an Algerian woman, her nose and mouth concealed beneath a white veil. We might naturally associate the image with certain interpretations of *hijab* (arguably patriarchal), but the veil also comes to represent, as a product of the restricted perspective offered us by the close-up, First Cinema's mystification of the cinematic apparatus.





The canted close-up initiates an ongoing disruption of what Baudry (and Berger) term “Renaissance perspective,” which tends to elaborate a space that centers the eye of the viewer to produce an “ideal vision.” Baudry considers this kind of representation “ideal” because it presents an imaginary wholeness and similitude corresponding to the mirror-image.<sup>5</sup> In other words, in the case of a painting like Hans Memling’s *Vanity*, or films like *Casablanca* (Curtiz, 1942), the artwork disdains to reveal itself as a form of representation, but pretends an unmediated material reality, complete in itself and thus readily consumable. Not only does cinema take up this narcissistic way of looking, it habitually takes it for granted.

Baudry refers here to Lacan’s theory of the *mirror stage*, a phase of psychological development occurring between six and eighteen months of age, during which period infants begin to recognize themselves in the mirror. This recognition creates the idea(l) of an “I” in the infant’s imagination<sup>6</sup> – an “I” which later inserts itself into the *cogito*; an “I” reified again and again before the silver screen. Mulvey elaborates, describing this illusive ego in terms of an ecstatic realization; whereas the infant first experiences its body as a confusion of disconnected parts, its reflection in the mirror appears unified and complete in itself. Recognition and mis-recognition overlap like superimposed shots: the infant sees how the

mirror-image corresponds with its body. But, pictured as a cohesive unit, that image is projected as an ideal ego.<sup>7</sup> The idea of a body replaces the body itself. The “I” becomes indivisible. First Cinema reproduces (while masking) this same contradiction, the better to capitalize on it.

By framing a perspective quite impossible without optical technology, the camera’s tilt in this first interior shot undermines the correspondence between “ideal vision” (or “ideal ego”) and the look of the camera. As opposed to simply reproducing human perception, Pontecorvo’s camera makes the machine’s perception (what Vertov calls the *kino-eye*) available to it.

Meanwhile, shot-scale fragments the Algerian woman’s body. Mulvey proposes that the close-up, in exhibiting body *parts* instead of wholes, throws a gap in the mirror-image demanded by Renaissance space, thereby shattering deep focus. The resulting image takes on the aspect of an icon, a symbol that can be made to stand for something outside the narrative framework.<sup>8</sup>

Flatness displaces realism.<sup>9</sup> While the cut in question sets up any number of shot-conflicts, as we have seen, undercutting Renaissance space in the process, there is little by this point to distinguish the close-up we’re analyzing from the narrative-stalling and spectacular variety Mulvey associates with Hollywood’s treatment of the woman-as-object. So far, the sequence adheres (for



the most part) to Hollywood stylistic conventions—the better to explode them as the sequence develops.

As the shot continues, the woman removes her veil, her face a flat image of detached resolve. This moment of unveiling also prefigures an unveiling of the cinematic apparatus, which begins with a rapid zoom from close-up to medium shot. The change in focal lengths by means of a zoom, as opposed to a simple cut, allows the spectator to visually participate in the shift to a wider perspective. The stationary re-framing (not a camera “movement,” *per se*) replicates the psychological experience of realization, a moment of sudden conscious understanding.

Previously isolated in close-up, the woman is revealed in the zoom-out to be flanked by first one, then two others. Now the framing centers her companion; it seems Pontecorvo is less concerned here with following an identifiable character than he is with the group’s dynamic. Representing three generations of Algerian women united by a common cause, they primp themselves before a mirror with an ornate gilded frame—a mirror so baroque, in fact, that we cannot help but associate it with the bourgeois opulence of First Cinema. But this sequence distinguishes itself from mirror scenes in Hollywood films—plot driven moments, generally speaking, used to emphasize a character’s vanity—by depicting a subversive appropriation of the mirror as a means by which to fashion an “ideal vision” as *disguise*, turning the ego-libido into a weapon against itself.

As spectators, we watch these women (all non-professional actors, importantly) transform themselves into star simulacra, modeled on First Cinema’s ideal woman-as-object. Cutting, dyeing, and rearranging their hair, applying make-up, trading shawls for skirts, they transition before our eyes (recalling our participation in the zoom) between *not-to-be-looked-at-ness*, as dictated by *bijab*, and what Mulvey calls *to-be-looked-at-ness*, as dictated by the bourgeois patriarchy. By Mulvey’s estimation, First Cinema devised the star-system in order to produce ideal egos in the mold of a more perfect mirror-image; centered in narrative space and time, glamorized actors and actresses play at the roles of “ordinary” people—at once recognized and mis-recognized by the public they allege to portray.<sup>10</sup>

But, as spectators, our perspective can hardly be described as centered here; instead, our focus is divided between mirror-images and the star-as-process. Our perspective can only be confused—which is to say “detached,” “critical,” “active.” The sequence presents us with a puzzle to solve, a mess to sort out: the mess of identity itself.

By the close of the sequence the newly transfigured “stars” will pose completely still within the frame, like department-store mannequins, satirizing the woman-as-object and the male-gaze that constructs her, all in the same instant. As such, the mirror in the *mise-en-scene* parodies the “mirror”—the narcissistic and homogenizing Renaissance space—of First Cinema. Supplied by the camera’s zoom-out and the mirror-image with a meta-perspective, we look at characters as they look at themselves and reconstitute their identities within the story (for the subversive purpose of planting bombs in European cultural spaces—a cafe, a discotheque, an airport). At the level of plot, the sequence suggests a new position for women, that of the revolutionary, a suggestion emphasized by the militaristic/nationalistic Algerian drumming on the soundtrack. At the level of shot-composition, Pontecorvo shows us how “stars” are produced, a demystification that collapses the distance between the “glamorous” and the “ordinary.”

It would be a mistake to consider this sequence completely out of context, however. Doing so puts us in danger of reading the film in its entirety as a propaganda that paints revolutionaries as unambiguous heroes of the

people, and their counterparts as mere automatons. Early in the film, we see how the revolution performs a “moral purification” of its own people.

In one scene, a mass of children set upon a homeless man, cleansing the movement of “bums,

junkies, and whores,” as prompted by its leaders. *The Battle of Algiers* is just as much a revolutionary how-not-to as a revolutionary how-to, incorporating dialectics into its whole narrative framework, not merely shot-by-shot. The makeover sequence itself follows on a series of plot-points in which the FLN assassinate several *gendarmes*, without specific provocation, and the French police retaliate by planting a bomb heart of the Casbah. These events escalate into the mass agitation depicted by the first shot in the sequence, and the “reprisal” bombing orchestrated by our “stars.” Several shots leading up to the bombings in the European district include humanizing close-ups of the intended victims—whereas the Algerian victims of the initial bombing are only shown *after* the fact, as so many mutilated corpses. Pontecorvo only allows us to identify with innocent victims in so far as they counterbalance the narrative.

To better come to terms with Pontecorvo’s critique of the star-system, let us turn for a moment to the work of another theorist. According to Benjamin, First Cinema conceived of the star-system in an attempt to reinstate the *aura*—the cult-value of an artwork derived from its authenticity, and rendered obsolete by its

“At any moment, the reader is ready  
to become a writer.”

—Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age  
of Its Technological Reproducibility”<sup>2</sup>



reproducibility. When the mirror-image becomes not only detachable from the mirror by means of photography, but also easily disseminated, the actor who embodies that image differs from her stage counterpart in an essential way: the film-actor's performance is mechanized—in actuality, a series of “test performances” before the camera, disassembled and reassembled by montage editing. Photography and film entail a technical reorganization of how we see space, and by extension, ourselves.

With the unique and unified presence of the *aura* destroyed by fragmentation, Hollywood reinvented celebrity and restored cult-value by erecting a cult of personality. Benjamin notes that the film industry need not depend on the star-system, that the star-system impedes us from seeing ourselves in a new light. To illustrate his point, he cites the documentation of work-processes in Soviet newsreels,<sup>11</sup> in which the workers portray themselves.<sup>12</sup> Taken a step or two further, Benjamin's theories imply that film can also document the process of starification itself.

Moreover, Benjamin's initial claim, that anyone has the right to be reproduced on film, sees an ominous reversal in a later sequence. The first Algerian woman reappears as the star in French surveillance footage recorded at a checkpoint and screened before an audience of French paratroopers (presaging the 2003 Pentagon screening in preparation for dealing with Iraqi insurgency). Her exaggerated visibility renders her quite invisible. But the question remains: does anyone retain the right *not to be* filmed? That this surveillance film contains a portion of the same material as the film which frames it, emphasizes the ideological adaptability of the medium. Pontecorvo essentially performs Kuleshov's

experiment with a different set of variables. The meaning of any shot depends on its entire context—not only its placement in relation to other shots, but its placement before an audience. “*Film makes test performances capable of being exhibited, by turning that ability itself into a test.*”<sup>13</sup>

Watching this sequence, in other words, we take part in an experiment with the ongoing experiment in seeing-as-experiencing that constitutes Film itself. Pontecorvo draws our attention not only to how stars are produced from the raw material of ordinary people, but to how stars are framed as well, recalling Baudry, who equates the mirror's frame to the frames of the cinema. Both are narrowly circumscribed, fused with a look—whereas reality excludes nothing. Only an infinite mirror could represent reality. But then, of course it would no longer be a mirror.<sup>14</sup> In order for a spectator to comfortably identify with a star, the star should be centered in a frame, should thereby resemble the spectator's mirror-image as per the Hollywood conventions. To frame the star (as process, as construction) within a frame creates a distance that pushes identification as recognition/misrecognition to its very breaking point; the spectator may identify with the ordinariness laid bare, but also sees that ordinariness fragmented into two images, two perspectives, two spaces. If Pontecorvo achieves this effect with a single mirror, how then, might we interpret multiple mirrors?

The *mise-en-scene* contains no less than three mirrors, three frames—three Cinemas, if we run with the metaphor. The screen itself represents an additional surface of reflection and projection. These points of view combine to form a many-sided space. We may be tempted to relate this many-sidedness with Baudry's





only stated alternative to Renaissance space: that of the ancient Greeks, for whom, according to Baudry, “space is discontinuous and heterogeneous ... correspond[ing] to the organization of their stage, based on a multiplicity of points of view”<sup>15</sup> But while this sequence certainly fabricates a Greek space—in the many points of view that make up a collective spectatorship—just as it encapsulates a Renaissance space—reflected yet scattered across four surfaces—it represents more than a synthesis between the two. The editing, camerawork, and *mise-en-scene* compose a space that dialectically opposes close-up and deep focus. Pontecorvo contrives a new deep focus, a deeper deep focus—that of *mise en abyme*. If First Cinema presents itself as a kind of mirror, then *The Battle of Algiers* holds a mirror to that mirror—showing a reflection of the audience.

But the film shows the audience to itself as more than the sum of its parts: not merely individuals feeling and seeing in isolation, but a being made up of their individual bodies and eyes. What we call the audience surpasses the spectator. Which is not to imply that the audience need be comprised of more than one or two spectators, as is frequently the case these days, now that technology shrinks a movie-theater to fit in the palm of the hand. *The Battle of Algiers* produces an audience even from a lone spectator. It opens up a revolutionary space containing multiple perspectives, both human and mechanical, and shows how to actively, self-consciously recognize the incongruities and disunites paradoxically united within a single frame—likewise within the “self.” One spectator’s way of seeing actually represents a conglomeration of however many ways, some conscious, some not; the “I” sees with a thousand eyes. Multiplicities within the shot correspond to multiplicities within the audience in place before it, as members of the collective spectatorship advocated by Solanas and Getino.

For Benjamin, as for Solanas and Getino, the reactions of an audience—laughing together, or crying together, seeing together as elements of a shared response to the action on screen—regulate each other in the collective unconscious.<sup>16</sup> What happens then, when a film like *The Battle of Algiers* brings the audience to collective consciousness? When “class-consciousness” can also mean the creation of a conscious class? The massive body of the audience, itself composed of numerous bodies, is imbued with a co-operative many-mindedness, which is to say, the means for political impetus. Action on screen elicits action *and* reaction. No longer satisfied to consume a set of meanings produced from on high, the audience can begin to produce meanings for itself. To tinker with Benjamin’s phrase: at any moment, the audience is ready to become a film crew.

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## Notes

- 1 Solanas, Ferdinando and Getino, Octavio. “Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of a Cinema of Liberation in the Third World.” *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*. ed. Corrigan, Timothy, Patricia White, and Meta Mazaj (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2011), 930.
- 2 Benjamin, Walter. “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility.” *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*. ed. Corrigan, Timothy, Patricia White, and Meta Mazaj (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2011), 241.
- 3 Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Association and Penguin Books, 1972), 16.
- 4 Solanas, Ferdinando and Getino, Octavio. “Towards a Third Cinema, 930.
- 5 Baudry, Jean-Louis. “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus.” *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*. ed. Corrigan, Timothy, Patricia White, and Meta Mazaj (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2011), 36-7.
- 6 Ibid., 41.
- 7 Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*. ed. Corrigan, Timothy, and Meta Mazaj (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2011), 718.
- 8 Ibid., 720.
- 9 This may begin to explain why montage theory developed in Soviet Russia, where radical politics re-appropriated the religious icon in service to the avant-garde. A series of “icons” provides the basis for dialectical montage, which encourages an active spectatorship by inviting us to bridge the gaps between shots, as opposed to passively consuming a film’s narrative flow. See for example the famous sequence from *October: Ten Days that Shook the World* (1928), in which Eisenstein undermines the Russian Orthodox faith and its traditional icons by juxtaposing a figure of Jesus with several deities taken from other pantheons; also cf. *Andrei Rublev* (Tarkovsky, 1969).
- 10 Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 718.
- 11 Including such films as Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1923). In addition to documenting the work processes of miners, manufacturers, firemen, and doctors, Vertov shows the work of the cinematographer, the editor, even the camera and the filmstrip; his aim is to make the cinematic apparatus conscious of itself.
- 12 Benjamin, Walter. “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” 239-41.
- 13 Ibid., 239.
- 14 Baudry, Jean-Louis. “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus,” 41.
- 15 Ibid., 37.
- 16 Benjamin, Walter. “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” 243.







"It's All About Mercy"

# Aki Kaurismäki and the Art of Getting By

BY MARC SAINT-CYR

Aki Kaurismäki has maintained an impressively steadfast devotion to the working class and society's misfits throughout his long and productive filmmaking career. Just as Yasujiro Ozu, a beloved hero of his, returned again and again to the terrain of Japanese family life and extracted from it a rich spectrum of characters and experiences, the Finnish producer, editor, writer, and director has firmly established the plight of the poor as his chief topic, remaining remarkably consistent in style and subject matter while simultaneously managing to produce works of great depth and variety. Kaurismäki's films map out the trials and tribulations of scraping a living within the harsh climate of capitalist society, following meek outcasts and sympathetic losers as they do what they can to survive and be happy. Work and romance are both key priorities in *Shadows in Paradise* (1986), Kaurismäki's third feature, in which lonesome garbage collector Nikander (Matti Pellonpää, who is as familiar and nourishing a presence in Kaurismäki's cinema as Gunnar Björnstrand or Erland Josephson in Ingmar Bergman's) awkwardly courts sullen supermarket cashier Ilona (Kati Outinen, who could be considered Kaurismäki's Liv Ullmann). *Ariel* (1988) irresistibly turns a quest for employment into a wild, unpredictable odyssey complete with a road trip across Finland in a Cadillac, a jailbreak, and a bank robbery while *Drifting Clouds* (1996) adopts a more sober approach in its tale of a courageous married couple (Outinen and Kari Väänänen) struggling to find fresh work in Helsinki. In *La vie de bohème* (1992), an adaptation of Henri Murger's



Aki Kaurismäki  
PHOTO: JEROME BONNET





*Scènes de la vie de bohème* (1851), the fanciful Parisian adventures of three starving artists (Pellonpää, Väänänen, and André Wilms) are jostled by the cruel realities of poverty, hunger, trouble with the law, and illness. Even in Kaurismäki's nutty cult classic *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* (1989), the outrageously pompadoured band's journey across the United States reveals a landscape of farms, smoky factories, and dive bars packed with blue-collar patrons. Kaurismäki's camera intently captures lives spent in search of the security and comfort that a steady job and hard work should bring. The goals of work, money, and sustenance are never far from sight in his films—though they are sometimes tragically out of reach.

The distinctive fashion in which Kaurismäki approaches such subjects has become an instantly recognizable hallmark of his cinema, consisting of a preference for vibrant colors and meticulously organized spaces, soundtracks made up of rock, blues, tango, and classical pieces, live musical performances, emotionally subdued performances from his actors, many of whom regular collaborators, and a matching sense of humor liberally sprinkled with absurdity and dark wit. His world of comically glum outsiders and deadpan rock 'n' rollers has earned him comparisons to Wes Anderson and

Jim Jarmusch, a good friend of his, while the sense of artifice and discipline he wields in the crafting of his films brings to mind Anderson's own stylistic mastery as well as that of Ozu, Robert Bresson, Jacques Tati, and Roy Andersson, whose most famous works are as if Kaurismäki's comedic traits, despairing worldview, and visual tidiness were all pushed to their extremes and given a ghoulish, desaturated makeover.

Kaurismäki has miraculously achieved a perfect harmony between supremely entertaining storytelling that often dips into noir and melodrama and potent social commentary, all the while somehow managing to avoid the pitfalls of cinematic escapism. Even as he basks in the glow of nostalgia, represented in his films by jukeboxes, classic cars, record players, and various other treasures from bygone eras, and indulges himself with loving references to Ozu, Bresson, Douglas Sirk, Jacques Becker, Marcel Carné, Jean Vigo, and many other legendary figures from film history—not to mention the amusing guest appearances by Jean-Pierre Léaud, Samuel Fuller, Louis Malle, Pierre Etaix, and Luce Vigo, daughter of Jean—he seldom ventures far from the real-world issues he is most concerned about. The challenges of getting a job, paying the bills, securing a bank loan, starting up a new business, and



enduring poverty and homelessness provide more than enough dramatic stakes for Kaurismäki to build compelling stories from. In that respect, he belongs with such filmmakers as Vittorio De Sica, Mike Leigh, Ken Loach, and Mikio Naruse, all of whom have, like him, committed substantial portions of their careers to portraying class- and money-oriented problems with exemplary skill, detail, and passion. It should come as no surprise that Kaurismäki is not particularly fond of contemporary Hollywood, which so often neglects the political conscience and values he holds so dear in favor of vapid spectacle and amusement. He is in fact quite outspoken about a number of things, including America's involvement in the Iraq War—which famously motivated his boycott of the 2003 Academy Awards when his film *The Man Without a Past* (2002) was nominated in the Best Foreign Language Film category—the world's downward spiral of economic ruin and inadequate governance, and the costs of humanity and compassion in its ongoing march towards progress. Highly distrustful of authority figures and bureaucracy, Kaurismäki presents himself as a charismatically dour pessimist with a mischievous streak and a strong appetite for alcohol and cigarettes—the very image of one of his own downtrodden characters.





Le Havre



He himself worked several jobs in his youth, serving at various points as a construction worker, hospital orderly, painter, postman, and dishwasher before starting Villealfa, his production company, with his older brother and fellow filmmaker Mika. But even as he gained worldwide acclaim, he never truly left behind his former life in the lower depths of the work force, instead drawing from those formative experiences a wealth of story material and a fiercely upheld set of beliefs that informs his public image and makes up the lifeblood of his work.

Kaurismäki's ongoing, multi-faceted exploration of existence on the ground level of Europe's socio-economic grid serves as a striking reminder of every person's status as a political being despite his or her stature, preference, or awareness. Essentially all of his characters are bound to and shaped by the spaces, priorities, and conditions dictated by such factors as where they work, how much income they earn, how their bosses treat them, whether they have bosses at all, how much time off they are given, whether they are recognized as legal citizens of the country they live in, and so forth. The personal sphere is unavoidably intermingled with the social one, and vice versa. In *Shadows in Paradise*, Nikander's job as a garbage man is just as crucial

to his character's personality as his preferred after-work activities—bingo, English lessons—friendship with Melartin (Sakari Kuosmanen), his burly co-worker, previous job as a butcher, or relationship with his sister (Mari Rantasila), who is in a mental hospital. The extreme loneliness of the protagonists in that film as well as *The Match Factory Girl* (1990), *I Hired a Contract Killer* (1990), and *Lights in the Dusk* (2006) is closely linked to their mundane jobs and living conditions, all of which influencing their individual courses towards misfortune, desperation, vengeance, and salvation. Likewise, the strong marriages at the core of *Drifting Clouds* and *Le Havre* (2011) better prepare their partners for the formidable challenges of joblessness, lean funds, and poor health. Context is everything, and elements as varied as financial stability, familial and romantic relations, contentment with one's occupation, and emotional well being all play their parts in determining who someone is and where they are going.

Unfortunately, the options open to Kaurismäki's characters regarding where they *can* go are often painfully limited. The ones lucky enough to have jobs are only granted so much agency by their wages, levels of experience, and places on the social ladder while those in less stable employment situations have it even

worse. Alienation and discrimination all too often rear their ugly heads in such cases, illustrating the specific natures of Kaurismäki's heroes' underdog orientations and hindering their efforts towards progress. In some cases, an air of shyness is all it takes to attract discomfort, manipulation, and conflict, as seen with Iris (Outinen) in *The Match Factory Girl*, Henri (Léaud) in *I Hired a Contract Killer*, and Koistinen (Janne Hyytiäinen) in *Lights in the Dusk*. Nikander's involvement in waste management makes him a target for rudeness in *Shadows in Paradise* while Outinen's Ilona in *Drifting Clouds* is at one point told that, at thirty-eight, she is too old to be considered as a serious job candidate. The principal characters of *La vie de bohème*, *The Man Without a Past*, and *Le Havre* are all regarded as untrustworthy riff-raff due to their peripheral positions in society—artists, nameless vagabonds, and elderly shoe shiners are apparently not the most reliable sorts in the eyes of "respectable" citizens. All of these outcasts face intimidation and real danger from above as well as below, if not from the police and shady business organizations, then from thieves, thugs, con artists, and gangsters. Not even the Leningrad Cowboys are entirely safe on their goofy road trips when they are thrown into a New Orleans jail cell for a brief stint, exploited by





Vladimir (Pellonpää), their tyrannical manager, and, in *Leningrad Cowboys Meet Moses* (1994), pursued by a CIA agent (Wilms). At its most serious, Kaurismäki's cinema can be quite troubling in its depictions of confinement, hopelessness, and pure existential dread. What is one to do if we are all mere pawns and weaklings in the eyes of indifferent employers, governments, banks, and criminals? Passivity and helplessness are tellingly prominent traits throughout Kaurismäki's work, and it is not uncommon for his characters to get beaten up or taken advantage of by bullies.

That is where Kaurismäki's chosen philosophies about living life come in. His films prioritize resourcefulness and security over

aggression and revolution; from his perspective, the mess that Europe and, in a more universal sense, the world are in is too big and complicated for anyone on the ground level to clean up, so therefore the most pressing business at hand is deciding how to make the best of the current situation. The array of options open to and pursued by Kaurismäki's characters can be arranged into three categories: relief, improvement, and liberation. In the tradition of Ozu, Bergman, and Woody Allen, Kaurismäki frequently highlights the simple joys in life that help alleviate despair, including food, drink, cigarettes and cigars, music, flowers, friendly dogs, and good company. "Life is short and miserable. Be merry while you can," out-of-work

doorman Melartin (Kuosmanen) says to Ilona, his former superior, in *Drifting Clouds* before he orders a bottle of wine for both of them, perfectly summing up Kaurismäki's own feelings about appreciating the time you are given in this cruel world. Yet sometimes even that is not enough, inspiring some to harbor more ambitious goals and dreams. In these cases, long-term sustainability and entrepreneurial independence are the primary objectives: in both *Shadows in Paradise* and *Lights in the Dusk*, characters discuss their plans to start up their own companies in their fields while in *Drifting Clouds*, after the devastating closure of the long-standing restaurant Dubrovnik, which deprives Ilona, Melartin, and the rest of its staff of their jobs, and



weeks of disappointing efforts to find alternative employers, a logical solution is reached: the launch of a brand-new dining establishment with Ilona as the manager. When attempts to work in a broken system come up short, the appeal of making something for oneself naturally becomes all the more enticing and can even represent a way to save one's life. An equally tantalizing route chosen in many of Kaurismäki's films is, simply, flight. *Shadows in Paradise*, *Ariel*, and *Le Havre* all end with characters making their escapes from threatening or dissatisfying environments by boat, seizing the promise of a new life in another land. Sadly, as seen in *Ariel* and *I Hired a Contract Killer*, death is also chosen as a means of escape, but thankfully Kaurismäki more often favors hope over bleakness. What makes his films so positive and uplifting despite their dark qualities is his persisting faith in the inner strength and goodness that push people to weather the storm and keep marching on for the sake of love and happiness.

*Drifting Clouds*, *The Man Without a Past*, and *Le Havre* signify three especially significant high points in Aki Kaurismäki's growth as an artist. In terms of style, they contain some of his most elegant and refined work, which is most clearly indicated by their luminous use of color—tones of blue, green, turquoise, red, and yellow in certain shots are nothing short of breathtaking—and beautifully economic storytelling grammar, properties for which his gifted production designers, editor Timo Linnasalo, and longtime cinematographer Timo Salminen also deserve credit. They are also among Kaurismäki's most optimistic and wholesome films, as each one of them makes a strong case for the importance of communal solidarity and devotion to one's friends, neighbors, and lovers. It is here, in these touching tales, where some of the most inspiring examples of human conduct ever filmed can be found.

In *Drifting Clouds*, Ilona and

Lauri, her husband, are a head waitress and streetcar driver, respectively, who both lose their jobs and are forced to venture through the wilderness of unemployment together. The steadily paced events of the film include some of Kaurismäki's finest moments, showing him at his most delicate and melancholy. The bedrock of *Drifting Clouds* lies in the two main characters' bonds to each other as husband and wife, which are founded upon small, lovingly performed gestures of support and the openhearted discussions and confessions they share. Whether enjoying peaceful moments together like their nocturnal streetcar ride through Helsinki—one of Kaurismäki's most lyrical scenes—encouraging each other when new prospects appear, or soothing each other's feelings of depression, fear, and uncertainty when those prospects lead to disappointment and further disaster, Ilona and Lauri maintain a deeply moving relationship of mutual understanding, patience, and loyalty rarely seen in films. While he strives to uphold his image as the man of the house, made perilously fragile by the loss of his job, with flashes of pride and stubbornness, she maintains her stance of control and logic in the marriage by diplomatically accommodating his ego, acting as the voice of common sense when his recklessness gets the better of him, and reserving the right to deny him forgiveness when he scares her with one particularly unwise course of action. But through it all, Ilona and Lauri remain each other's best friends and most reliable sources of comfort, a tenacious army of two against the world.

Yet even they cannot change their fates entirely alone, and Dubrovnik's staff members' lasting loyalty to one another proves to be instrumental in their return to the work force. The camaraderie between the cooks and floor staff is understated yet still clearly felt in their interactions and group scenes with each other while still on the job, subtly implying that familiar sense of

trust so crucial to a positive workplace. After the old restaurant closes, they drift apart and follow separate trajectories of job hunting and drunken aimlessness. Later on, when Ilona runs into Melartin and Lajunen (Markku Peltola), Dubrovnik's alcoholic cook, neither of them appears to have fared very well in their post-Dubrovnik existences, the latter having relapsed and committed himself to an epic vodka binge. Luckily, as is often the case, Kaurismäki proves himself to be a benevolent creator and, in *Drifting Clouds*' third act, goes about reuniting the little family of restaurant workers, starting with a fortuitous meeting between Ilona and Mrs. Sjöholm (Elina Salo), Dubrovnik's former manager, who decides to put up the money for Ilona's business venture. Lauri and Melartin become Ilona's right-hand men in her new restaurant's steady preparation and oversee the process of getting Lajunen off the streets and into a rehab clinic, which restores his culinary ambitions as much as his health. Renovation work is carried out under Ilona's supervision, brand new kitchen appliances are installed, and Ilona and Lajunen carefully plan the menu together, deciding to prioritize hearty dishes with large portions to better serve the working class customers in the area. On the restaurant's opening day, which serves as the film's brilliantly simple, nail-bitingly tense climactic scene, the kitchen and dining area are staffed with familiar faces from Dubrovnik, all of them having been saved and given a new sense of purpose by Ilona just as Lauri, Melartin, and Lajunen were, standing together once more to face this latest moment of truth. Besides being a beautiful ode to spousal respect and perseverance amidst hard times, *Drifting Clouds* also pays tribute to the importance of friendship and unity between co-workers.

Charity is even more fervently advocated in *The Man Without a Past*, which explores the interesting question of whether someone





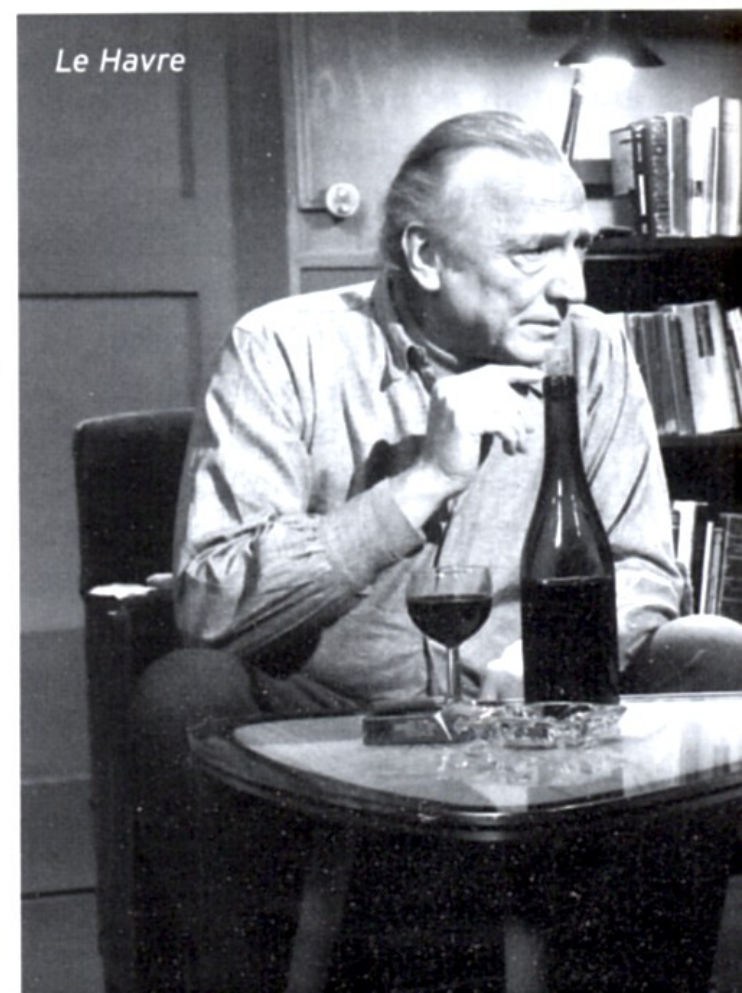
The Man Without a Past

could actually survive in contemporary society without money, a social security number, or even a name. Peltola plays the title character who is beaten up and robbed upon his arrival in Helsinki, causing him to lose his memory and everything else he brought with him except for, literally, the clothes on his back. He makes his way to a slum village, is restored to health by a kind family, and shortly thereafter begins to go about making a new life for himself from scratch. With an intimidating yet softhearted security guard (Kuosmanen) serving as his landlord, he moves into an empty shipping container, cleans it out and transforms it into a cozy habitat, makes new friends, finds a love interest in Irma (Outinen), a Salvation Army officer, eventually finds work with her organization, and even ponders the idea of becoming a rock 'n' roll manager after pushing the Salvation Army band towards a hipper musical style. By busying himself with gardening, cleaning, improving his appearance, seeking employment, and forming new social connections, the plucky amnesiac re-discovers the basic roots of survival and productivity as an active community member,

carrying on and applying himself to constructive pursuits despite his lack of identity and official citizenship. Along the way, he learns firsthand just how instrumental things like benevolence, lenience, and luck are in order to receive nourishment, security, work, and even legal defense in his difficult position, a realization that is reinforced when Irma simply says to him, "It's all about mercy." His gradual recovery is owed just as much to the windfalls of faith, chance, and trust that come his way largely thanks to the people around him as it is to his own courage and ingenuity. Championing both the motivation to keep going and the kindness of strangers, *The Man Without a Past* is the epitome of a feel-good charmer and may well be Kaurismäki's most unabashedly hopeful film.

With *Le Havre*, Kaurismäki's cinematic language reached a new level of stripped-down simplicity. The bare necessities of survival are distilled into a few crystal-clear images: a handful of bills and coins scattered on a tabletop, a sandwich and some money left in a brown paper bag as a gift, a wooden crate packed with groceries, a meager lunch consisting

of a one-egg omelet and a small glass of red wine. The neighborhood in the titular port city where much of the film is set is a warm, welcoming realm of old-fashioned quaintness and close-knit fellowship complete with a bakery, a small grocery, and a local bar right out of Tati's *Mon oncle* (1958). The shoe shiner Marcel Marx (Wilms, who first played the character in *La vie de bohème*) and his wife Arletty (Outinen) can be seen as quintessential Kaurismäki characters, as humble as you can possibly get. Yet *Le Havre* also covers entirely new ground for the filmmaker in its shift into more overtly geopolitical territory. Kaurismäki briefly touched on illegal immigration and deportation in *La vie de bohème*, but *Le Havre* adopts a far more pointed approach to those subjects by directly addressing the current issues of widespread refugee arrivals throughout Europe and crackdowns carried out in response by the authorities. In a key scene, Marcel learns that Chang (Quoc-Dung Nguyen), a friend and fellow shoe shiner, is not Chinese as he originally thought, but instead a refugee from Vietnam who spent eight years working to pay for a new identity. Chang speaks with pride about his hard-won ability to enjoy social security, provide for his family, and even vote, showing a deep appreciation for the political freedoms so easily granted to official citizens. Marcel's network of



Le Havre



friends and neighbors becomes even further involved with the plights of illegal immigrants when Idrissa (Blondin Miguel), an African boy, arrives by mistake in Le Havre and flees the police in order to reach his mother in London. Where in the past Kaurismäki's characters were kept at a distance from large-scale political events that only reached them by way of newspaper articles and television broadcasts, in *Le Havre* the neighborhood's assorted residents take a more active role by recognizing how their lives intersect with the refugee issue—which has already been proven by Chang's integration into their community—and doing whatever they can to help Idrissa. When fate appoints him as Idrissa's temporary guardian, Marcel provides food and shelter for the boy and takes it upon himself to help him escape. Embarking on a journey that brings him to an African marketplace, a seaside camp, and a detention centre, the elderly Frenchman becomes an unlikely cross-cultural voyager, navigating a winding course into the diasporic spaces of contemporary France armed only with a few euros, quick wits, and sincerity. Marcel takes a night bus to Calais to track down Idrissa's grandfather (Umban U'kset), to whom he gives his word he will get Idrissa back to his mother and protect him while he remains in Le Havre, sees to the challenge of arranging safe passage

by boat to England, and organizes a charity concert with local rock legend Roberto "Little Bob" Piazza in order to raise the money needed for the smuggling operation, carrying out each task in a truly extraordinary spirit of selfless chivalry while Arletty struggles with a serious ailment in the hospital. The unconditional acts of generosity Marcel and his friends perform for Idrissa convey a clear message: if the values of honor, humanity, and kindness are at all going to stand a chance against overwhelmingly grim circumstances—especially when governments fail to provide effective solutions—this is the manner in which they need to be upheld.

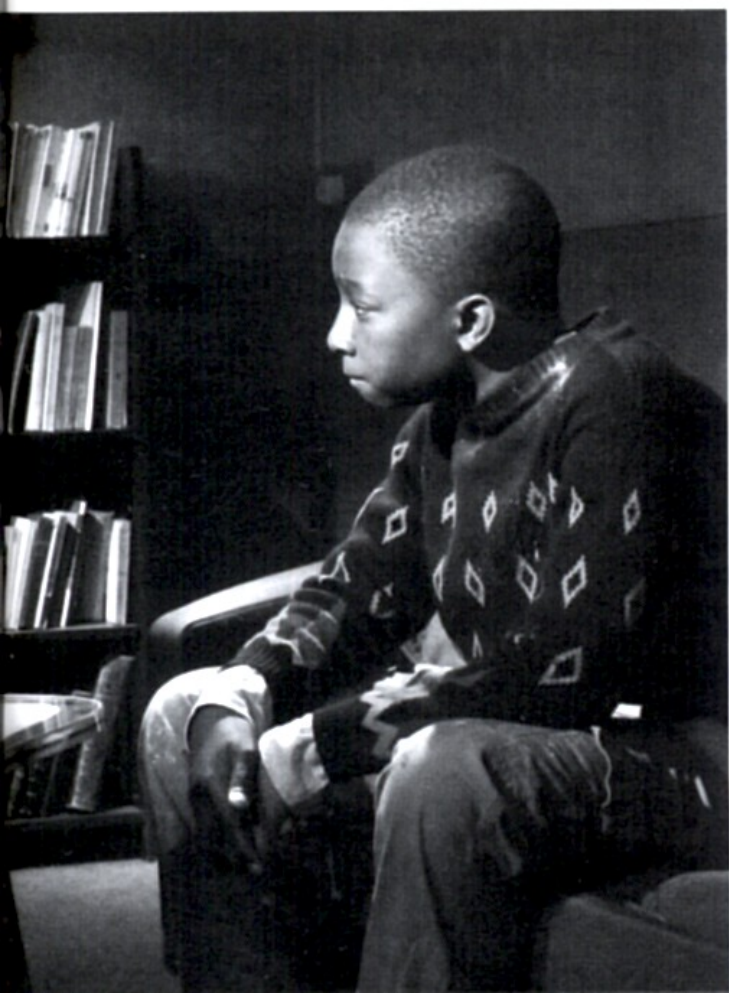
As of this writing, it is still too early to tell whether *Le Havre* is the starting point of a new, more politically ambitious period in Kaurismäki's career. "O Tasqueiro," his segment in the Guimarães-set omnibus film *Centro Histórico* (2012) is similarly streamlined but far slighter in its story material concerning a day in the life of a lonely bartender (Ilkka Koivula). But hopefully his focus will return to current events once more, as the illegal immigration phenomenon is just one of many film-worthy realities that have come to define life in the twenty-first century. From the debt emergency rippling across Europe to the massive protests triggered by rage over leadership conditions in such countries as Bulgaria, Brazil, Egypt, and Turkey to the devastating global warming damage inflicted by remorseless fossil fuel companies, trends of frustration, imbalance, and instability throughout the world are becoming increasing commonplace—and serious. For Kaurismäki, who keeps returning to the people who are most affected by such forces, his kinds of stories have perhaps never been more meaningful or greatly needed. While his particular cinematic voice lacks the righteous fury needed to properly condemn those responsible—for that, the likes of Jean-Luc Godard, Nagisa Oshima,

and Shohei Imamura during their runs in the 1960s would be ideal—it can still provide some much-needed guidance regarding how people should help themselves and each other during dark times within their limited means. And in a period when mainstream cinema is yielding so many unsettlingly nihilistic products—*Star Trek: Into Darkness* (2013) and *Man of Steel* (2013) being two especially notable examples—the spirit of humanism, compassion, and conscientiousness so integral to the films of Kaurismäki, Ozu, De Sica, Tati, and their counterparts is becoming an increasingly rare feature of the contemporary film landscape, accumulating even more therapeutic value as it grows scarcer. As always, but especially now, when cinema's usefulness as a tool for political criticism and expression is often forgotten or neglected amidst blockbuster mania, close attention should to be paid to the kinds of messages that films impart to their audiences, and it is up to socially concerned and morally aware filmmakers like Kaurismäki to set the necessary standards. He himself said it best in an interview in late 2012 at the fifty-third Thessaloniki International Film Festival, which held a retrospective of his work: "In these days when the world, our society, is going to the drain by Das Kapital, I think you can't make a film which is not part political. It should be a bit, because otherwise we only have entertainment and nobody's laughing."<sup>1</sup>

*Marc Saint-Cyr studied cinema and history at the University of Toronto. He has written for CineAction, Midnight Eye, Senses of Cinema, and the Toronto J-Film Pow-Wow, among other publications.*

#### Notes

- 1 "11 Precious Minutes with Aki Kaurismäki," *Flix*, November 21, 2012







Post-Racial Pipedreams

BY GREG BURRIS

## Race and Class in *The Blind Side*

"Fifty years ago we had to watch out for people with white sheets, now they have on pinstripe suits. ... Our fathers had to fight Jim Crow, we've got to fight James Crow Jr., Esquire." —*Al Sharpton*<sup>1</sup>

Midway through *The Blind Side* (2009), there is a moment when an underlying theme emerges from beneath the film's smorgasbord of football, faith, and family values. The central protagonist, Leigh Anne Tuohy (Sandra Bullock)—a tough-talking, white Memphis housewife who has taken an impoverished Black teenager out of the ghetto and into her gated community—is having an upscale lunch with a group of aristocratic friends. Commenting on Leigh Anne's latest acquisition, one of her dining partners feigns admiration and lets a supercilious compliment slip from her lips: "Honey, you're changing that boy's life." Detecting condescension, Leigh Anne responds curtly, "No, he's changing mine."

It is here that the heart of *The Blind Side*'s feel-good message is laid bare. The film is about change. It affirms not only that change is possible but that we are presently in the midst of it. In this way, *The Blind Side* taps into one of the operative keywords of the contemporary moment. If previously the very utterance of this term was enough for the bigots to reach for their bullets, today *everyone* seems to be demanding it—from Occupy Wall Street



radicals on the Left to Tea Party reactionaries on the Right. Change has become a post-political passphrase.

While social and political change is indeed necessary, these days calling for change often represents little more than an empty gesture, an undeserved pat-on-the-back that allows us to pretend we have turned away from our past transgressions when really we are still wallowing in them. Ripped from any transformative implications and marketed for mass-consumption, change has been refashioned into a sleek and sexy slogan—a commodity that relieves us of our guilt without challenging the underlying behavior and treats the symptom but not the cause. It is not for nothing, then, that the optimistic slogan “hope and change” played a decisive role in the 2008 US presidential elections, turning Barack Obama into a latter-day messiah and catapulting him into the White House. Change feels good, *especially when nothing fundamental really changes at all.*

One of the primary ways the gospel of change has manifested itself in contemporary politics is the widespread belief that we are entering a post-racial era. While the election of Obama looms large in such narratives, it is important to recognize that this trend has been in the making for quite some time. Indeed, even though the cowboy presidency of George W. Bush had its moments of overt racism—his abysmal handling of Hurricane Katrina, for instance—one must not forget that it was Bush who appointed Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice as the United States’ first and second African-American secretaries of state. The game of post-racialism is thus one that the Right is also adept at playing. Suffice it to recall that the election of the country’s first Black president was anticipated by *24*, one of the most reactionary television programs of the post-9/11 era.

Importantly, all of the self-congratulatory praise about post-racial progress comes at a time of real racial problems including widening economic gaps, police brutality, a racist war on drugs, and a growing corporate-prison-industrial complex. This nightmarish landscape of injustice is one in which martyrs like Oscar Grant and Trayvon Martin are not the exception but the rule. On this point, the distinction between the Bush and Obama regimes quickly disintegrates. With the latter’s election, even Eldridge Cleaver’s old solution to the race problem—his proposal to “put a black finger on the nuclear trigger”—has proven futile.<sup>1</sup>

How does one reconcile these seemingly irreconcilable developments? What does it mean when racial injustices persist at a time when yesteryear’s Dixiecrats are casting their ballots for Black businessman Herman Cain? It is imperative that we understand these apparent contradictions not as unrelated phenomena but as

different modes of governance being simultaneously deployed by the same capitalist structures of power. Like the old good cop-bad cop routine, both constitute attempts at achieving the same ends, and both serve to perpetuate the same underlying system of capitalist accumulation. The existence of post-racial discourse indicates not that institutional racism has been successfully overcome but that existing power structures and class hierarchies have diversified their strategies, that their closet of white sheets also contains a coat of many colors.

Thus, the old, heated debates about cultural homogenization or hybridization are outdated. It is neither one or the other but both. To paraphrase Stuart Hall, contemporary capitalism is attempting not to obliterate differences but to operate through them.<sup>4</sup> Or, to take it a step further, capitalism is not simply catering to preexisting differences but playing an active role in their constitution. Diversity has come to be seen as a business opportunity, as a potential new customer for the latest niche-marketing scheme. Whereas the old ideology of the melting pot suggested that differences could be overcome insofar as *They* became like *Us*, the post-racial regime of power pursues a different tactic. That which cannot be assimilated is integrated into the capitalist marketplace.

Culture is appropriated; it is divested of subversive content and refashioned as a chic new commodity. The melting pot is still with us; it is just simmering at a different temperature.

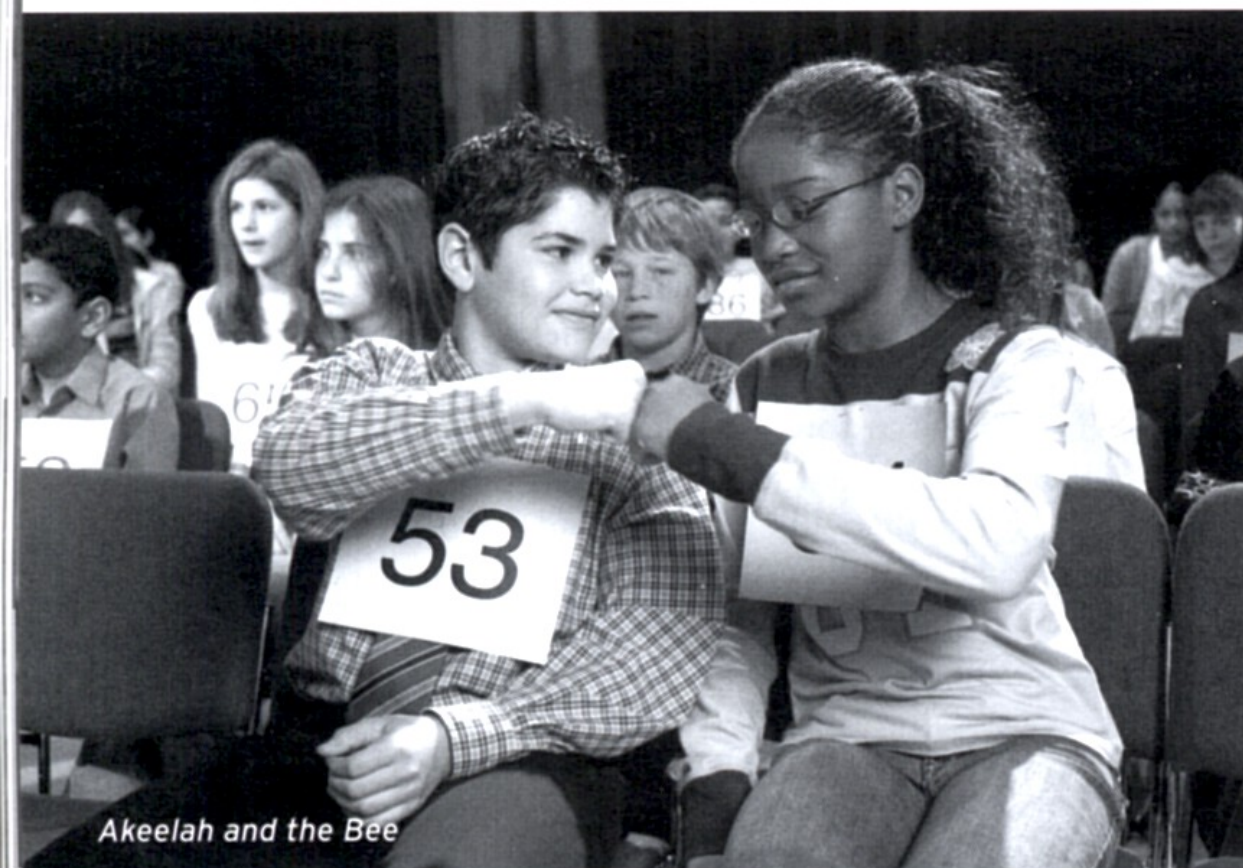
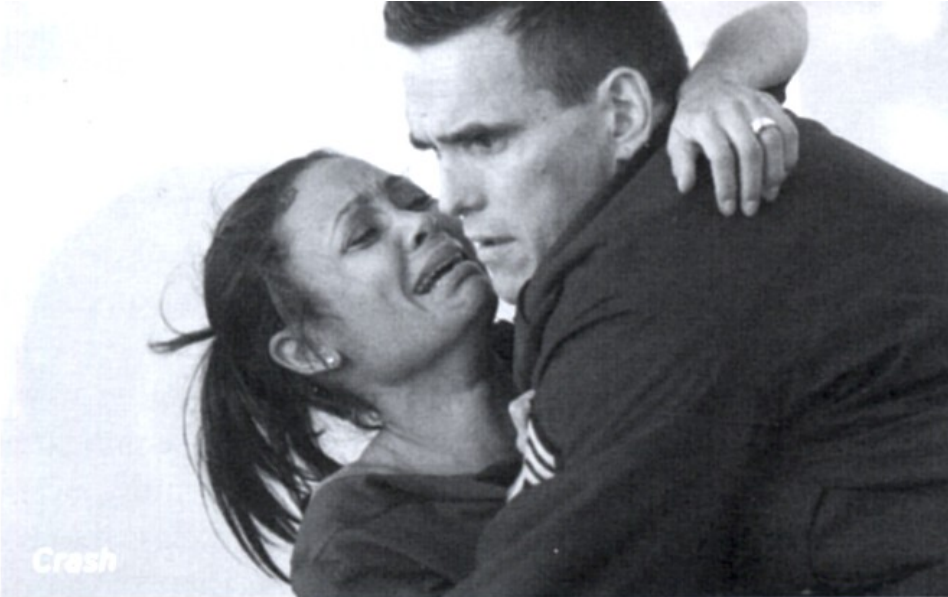
These trends have a tremendous relevance for our assessment of Hollywood, an industry which has not merely been influenced by the discourse of post-racial progress but has been an active contributor to it. Already, the new century has witnessed the appearance of a number of cinematic trends—everything from a nauseating stream of quasi-fascistic superhero spectacles to a ghoulish parade of zombies, teen vampires, and torture.<sup>5</sup> But while none of these cycles is properly understood outside the social and political context in which it is conceived, produced, and consumed, the discourse of post-racial progress has perhaps left its clearest mark with the appearance of several high-profile productions dealing with race relations—a growing list that includes such films as *Crash* (2004), *Coach Carter* (2005), *Akeelah and the Bee* (2006), *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006), *Pride* (2007), *The Express* (2008), *Invictus* (2009), *Precious* (2009), *The Help* (2011), *Red Tails* (2012), *42* (2013), and *The Butler* (2013).

To be sure, differences certainly exist between these various films. *The Butler*, for instance, has far more pedagogical potential than any of the hackneyed lessons in do-it-yourself citizenship doled out by *The Pursuit of Happyness*, and *Crash* is a much better crafted film than the barely-watchable *Red Tails*. When looked at together,

“Racism works in convoluted ways.”

—Angela Davis<sup>2</sup>





however, several shared patterns and themes begin to emerge. These similarities are strong enough to merit special consideration, and it is by examining these films collectively that we can start tracing the contours of an emerging film genre—what I have chosen to refer to as *the post-9/11 Hollywood race drama*.

Each of these terms carries significance. *Post-9/11* distinguishes these films temporally. While their relationship to earlier cycles like the plantation genre of the 1930s, the various Sydney Poitier films of the sixties, the Blaxploitation phase of the seventies, or the civil rights legal dramas of the nineties should not be overlooked, the current wave is part of the present moment and in dialogue with contemporary realities. *Hollywood* distinguishes these films as pieces of mainstream entertainment. By that, I mean to indicate that they are largely intended for white consumption—a point not negated by the occasional presence of Black directors or screenwriters (e.g., Lee Daniels). This framing for a white gaze could hardly be sustained without certain sacrifices, and it is for this reason that white characters in these films are often the most heroic anti-racists of all. Finally, with the word *race*, I am distinguishing this cycle from films which are about Black people without being about race relations like Dee Rees' *Pariiah* (2011) or John Sayles' excellent *Go For Sisters* (2013), and with the word *drama*, I am distinguishing it from fantasy-action movies that tread similar racial waters like *Django Unchained* (2012) or even *Avatar* (2009).

Significantly, there is nothing particularly controversial about the content of post-9/11 Hollywood race dramas. While narratives about race and racism have the potential to be politically explosive—just recall the heated reception of Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) or the embarrassed silence that accompanied the release of *Mandingo* (1975) or Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991)—there is nothing threatening or divisive about post-9/11 Hollywood race dramas. Rather than calling the dominant order into question, these more recent films make apologies for it, comforting audiences with the reassuring post-racial platitude that society has fundamentally changed and left its racist sins behind. As such, these films are equal opportunity entertainers. They allure audiences across the political spectrum and are capable even of moving the likes of Barbara Bush to tears.<sup>6</sup>

The post-9/11 Hollywood race drama can therefore be further distinguished by three ideological characteristics. First, almost all of these films either claim to be based on true events or are set in recognizable historical circumstances (e.g., the Jim Crow South). Anchored to history in this fashion, these films operate in a mode that contrasts sharply to earlier forms of entertainment which had appealed to fantasy as a shield against critical interrogation. As Andrew Britton noted in his blistering critique of the various George Lucas and Steven



Spielberg-helmed fantasies of the 1980s, “The ideology of entertainment is one of the many means by which late capitalism renders the idea of transforming the real unavailable for serious consideration.” But if Reaganite cinema attempted to disguise its noxious politics beneath the claim that “it’s only entertainment,” Obamite cinema works towards the same ends in a rather different fashion, declaring that “it’s only reality.” Indeed, how does one dispute something if it *really* happened? Using history as an alibi, an attempt is made to remove the political-ideological content of these films as a possible point of debate.

Second, despite its anti-racist sentiments, the post-9/11 Hollywood race drama replicates a fundamental racist conceit—the belief in stable racial identities. While these films certainly treat racial categories differently than does the traditional racist, they nevertheless reify the same socially-constructed lines of demarcation. In these films, the belligerent language of segregation and apartheid has been replaced by the benevolent words of post-racial progress, but the basic coordinates of white supremacy remain intact; there is a *We* and there is a *They*, and the line separating the two is clear and impenetrable. Here, one may be reminded of the conclusion of *The Help* in which the film’s Black domestic workers encourage the young, white protagonist to not feel guilty about leaving them behind as she takes off for her upwardly mobile life of promise and opportunity. At *The Help*’s end, *the help are still the help*—and even more, they are happy about it! Such post-racial pipedreams work to obscure the contingent, socially-constructed, and fundamentally contestable nature of racial divisions. As Terry Eagleton puts it, these boundaries “are porous and ambiguous, more like horizons than electrified fences.” While the post-9/11 Hollywood race drama fortifies these borders, the truly radical gesture is to *explode them*—that is, to defy the conventional norms of identitarian categorization and to create new, imaginative constellations of social solidarity.

Third, these films absolve institutions of any wrongdoing. They do this either by erasing the existence of institutions altogether (as in *Crash*), or—perhaps even more insidiously—by glorifying them as the primary instigators of progress and change. To take just two examples, *The Pursuit of Happyness* reimagines Wall Street as the answer to our ills rather than their cause, and *42* rewrites history so that the integration of baseball is spearheaded by the capitalists at the top. Racism in these films is not an historical system of power and privilege but a quirk of personal prejudice, and institutional violence is displaced onto individual scapegoats. While these unfortunate whipping boys usually take the form of ignorant Southerners, they sometimes come in a rather conspicuous color. Trying their hand at the old game of blaming the victim, *Precious* and *The Help* suggest that the greatest danger to Black women is abusive Black men. Adopting the problematic politics of Bill

Cosby, these two films let existing hierarchies and institutions off the hook by implying that Blacks have no one to blame but themselves.

If one film comes the closest to fully embodying all of the features of the post-9/11 Hollywood race drama, it is *The Blind Side*. Directed by John Lee Hancock and released in late 2009 at a time of great political polarization, *The Blind Side* accomplished something that no politician seemed capable of doing; it appealed to audiences across the spectrum of opinion, paradoxically charming members of both liberal Hollywood and the conservative Bible Belt. Making ample use of the key ideological features of the post-9/11 Hollywood race drama, *The Blind Side* grounds itself with a claim to historical authenticity, draws clearly demarcated lines of racial division, and treats existing institutions as the solution to our racial and economic problems rather than their cause. By advancing these positions, *The Blind Side* both partakes in and contributes to the narrative of post-racial progress. It presents audiences with a reassuring notion of change stripped of any transformative implications, thus ensuring that nothing fundamental to the status quo is actually challenged.

*The Blind Side* tells the story of Michael Oher (Quinton Aaron), an overgrown Black teenager living in poverty in a gang-ridden Memphis slum. With no father of his own and a drug addict for a mother, Michael often ends up sleeping on neighbors’ sofas. One afternoon, Big Tony (Omar Dorsey), the father of one of Michael’s friends, takes him to see the football coach at Wingate Christian School, a private academy servicing the city’s *crème de la crème*. Impressed with his size and presumed athletic potential, the coach manages to secure a place for Michael at the elite school despite his dismal academic record. Adjustment to his new surroundings, however, does not come easily, and Michael is soon spotted wandering the streets on a cold, rainy night by Leigh Anne Tuohy, a rich, Southern aristocrat whose own two children—S.J. (Jae Head) and Collins (Lily Collins)—also attend Wingate. Realizing that Michael has nowhere to go, Leigh Anne and her husband Sean (Tim McGraw) invite Michael into their luxurious home. What begins as a single night on the sofa gradually turns into an adoption as Michael becomes part of the Tuohy family. Under their tutelage, he paves a path out of destitution into a life of fame and fortune on the football field.

A quick glance at the plot of *The Blind Side* may suggest that the film is chiefly concerned with the life of a poor Black teenager. But *The Blind Side* is not a story about how one of society’s oppressed members can work to transform the people and institutions around him; rather, it is a story about how society can transform one of its oppressed members into an ideal, post-racial citizen. It is no coincidence, then, that Sandra Bullock was the only actor from the film to take home an Oscar.



Her character's story is the one that matters most. For it is through Leigh Anne that the film suggests we have entered a post-racial era in which the barriers of Jim Crow have been effectively torn down, that existing structures of power have the ability to bring prosperity to society's downtrodden, and that the American Dream is equally available to all.

*The Blind Side* is based on Michael Lewis' bestselling 2006 book of the same name which is, in turn, based on true events.<sup>11</sup> This connection to reality was even further reinforced when the real-life Tuohys (*sans* the real-life Michael Oher) walked down the red carpet at the Academy Awards in early 2010. Such pretenses of authenticity, however, should not be mistaken for uncontested objectivity, and it is worth noting the remarkable incongruity between the real-life Michael Oher's reaction to the film and that of his adopted white family. In his autobiography, Oher makes it clear that even though he found the film entertaining, it was also a source of "wounded pride."

I liked the movie as a movie, but in terms of it representing me, that's where I had a hard time loving it. I felt like it portrayed me as dumb instead of as a kid who had never had consistent academic instruction and ended up thriving once he got it.<sup>12</sup>

In particular, Oher was upset that he was depicted as having no basic understanding of the rules of football.

I could not figure out why the director chose to show me as someone who had to be taught the game of football. Whether it was S.J. moving around ketchup bottles or Leigh Anne explaining to me what blocking is about, I watched those scenes thinking, "No, that's not me at all! I've been studying—really studying—the game since I was a little kid!"<sup>13</sup>

But if Oher's reaction to *The Blind Side* was less than enthusiastic, Sean and Leigh Anne Tuohy embraced the film, going out of their way in their 2010 book on "cheerful giving" to thank the filmmakers for "keeping the story true."<sup>14</sup> As for Oher's negative reaction, the Tuohys dismissed it as an act of denial and alleged that he did not like the film simply because it reminded him too much of his painful past.<sup>15</sup> If for Oher, then, *The Blind Side* was painful because it was *not true*, the Tuohys insisted the exact opposite, claiming that he objected because it was *too true*.

While this discrepancy gives us a legitimate grounds for doubting the veracity of all the film's truth claims, it is important that our suspicions extend beyond the realm of empirical data. Even if *The Blind Side* were somehow found to be completely and incontrovertibly factual, this

would still not provide the film with a convincing shield against critical interrogation—a point worth extending to the entire cycle of post-9/11 Hollywood race dramas. The world is full of true stories, most quite different from this one. And yet, they are not usually made into best-selling books or blockbuster films. The questions we should be asking are, why this story? Why this reception? Why now?

It is significant that the transformation of Michael into a post-racial citizen is predicated on his solitude. For a film purportedly about race, its cast remains remarkably vanilla. The roles of people like Big Tony and his son Steven (who, according to the book, was actually admitted into Wingate before Michael) are diminished, and with the exception of several drug-dealing gang members and a few token bureaucrats, *The Blind Side* keeps the number of its Black characters to a minimum. This isolation of Michael serves to protect entrenched racial regimes against disruption. Whereas a single teenager can be easily integrated into the dominant order, the entire Black community poses a greater challenge. One may be reminded here of the words of US President Andrew Johnson who publicly voiced his concern that the immediate introduction of ex-slaves into the US citizenry might overwhelm "the digestive powers of the American government."<sup>16</sup>

The process by which *The Blind Side* depicts Michael as being integrated into the post-racial order follows a line of progression similar to the experiments in structural readjustment described in Naomi Klein's book *The Shock Doctrine*.<sup>17</sup> Drawing a parallel, insightful as it is chilling, between CIA-funded research on psychiatric shock therapy and capitalist attempts to remold entire societies into bastions of neoliberal economics, Klein argues that the goal in both cases is to wipe the slate clean, to create a *tabula rasa* upon which the brainwashed patient or shell-shocked society can be reconstituted in whatever way the brainwasher sees fit. Whether pursued through psychological torture or neoliberal structural readjustment, the goal is to destroy resistance through the simulated lobotomization of a captive population.

While it may initially seem far-fetched to make a comparison between Klein's findings and *The Blind Side*, it is not entirely without precedent. In the book, Lewis himself hints at this possibility, writing that "Leigh Anne Tuohy was trying to do for one boy what economists had been trying to do, with little success, for less developed countries for the last fifty years." Continuing on, Lewis—a writer whose quiver seems to always be filled with the irreverent arrows of cultural stereotypes—jokes that Leigh Anne's methods resembled "a steady drip-drip-drip Chinese cultural reeducation program, administered by her, to assimilate him into their world."<sup>18</sup>

In *The Blind Side*, Michael's reeducation likewise begins with a shock: the erasure of Michael's past. Viewers of the film are given scarcely a glimpse into



Michael's previous life—a whisper here, a brief flashback there, but nothing substantial. While it is clear that his past was traumatic, few details emerge. Indeed, Michael himself is depicted as being aloof from his own history. As Sean puts it in the film, "Michael's gift is his ability to forget. He's mad at no one, and he really doesn't care what happened in the past." Michael's past is imagined out of existence. He is presented as a blank page.

Erasing Michael's history in this fashion also functions to sever his ties to what Glen Ford claims to be the single most progressive constituency in the US body politic—the Black community.<sup>19</sup> Deprived of this important link, Michael's racial identity becomes an empty signifier. His Blackness is impoverished; it has been atomized and individualized, deprived of its subversive sting and rendered safe for white consumption. All that remains is a dark complexion and a taste for mainstream hip hop. It is through such means that non-dominant groups are appropriated and—as Herbert Marcuse once put it—"digested by the status quo as part of its healthy diet."<sup>20</sup> Representatives of the dominant order—the privileged post-racial citizen—are allowed to choose culture, to casually sample the cultures of conquered peoples like a consumer requesting a tasting spoon at an ice cream shop. In *The Blind Side*, this cultural cannibalization is most often represented in the actions of little S.J.—his flippant use of the Spanish word "*mañana*" to say good-bye, his donning of a Native American headdress at a school Thanksgiving pageant, and his animated performance of Black hip hop. Michael is merely the next phase of this process, the latest representative of a non-dominant group for the ruling order to commodify.

With his history obliterated and his connection to the Black community dissolved, Michael is depicted as an emotional infant. At one point, a big, smiling Michael is on the school playground, merrily pushing two young girls on the swing set. When he starts football practice, he becomes distracted by the sight of colorful balloons floating in the air, staring at them with a childlike curiosity. But his infantilization is most apparent in his friendship with the wise-cracking S.J. Even though S.J. is half Michael's age and a fraction of his size, they hang out together, play together, and eat in the school cafeteria together. By night, they lay in bed together contentedly listening to Leigh Anne as she reads them bedtime stories; by day, they ride around in a truck together singing and dancing with Young MC's "Bust a Move" in the place of yesteryear's "Zip-a-dee-doo-dah, Zip-a-dee-ay." But S.J. is more than just a playmate. He even assumes the role of life coach, imparting bits of wisdom to Michael throughout the film.

This infantilization of Michael also involves his desexualization. Towards the end of the film, Leigh Anne reports that Michael had nightmares for weeks after a college recruiter took him to a "titty bar," and when one of her high society dining partners asks if she is worried about Michael "sleeping under the same roof" as her teenage daughter Collins, Leigh Anne's response is cold: "Shame on you." Of all the offensive things these friends say and insinuate, why is this the question that irks Leigh Anne so? Is it because her friend was giving voice to that old, racist fear of miscegenation? Or, did Leigh Anne become incensed at the implication that Michael might indeed have a libido?

The question of Michael's sexuality comes to the forefront when Michael and his adopted family arrive at the University of Mississippi. There, the males of the Tuohy household—Sean, Michael, and even little S.J.—cannot help but let their eyes linger on the bodies of the young female students all around them. This is the first and only time that Michael is presented as having any sexual desire, and for this, he is duly reprimanded. Sensing his arousal, Leigh Anne issues a stern threat—not to her gawking husband or her goo-goo-eyed son

but to Michael. "If you get a girl pregnant out of wedlock," she warns, "I will crawl in the car, drive up here to Oxford, and I will cut off your penis." Because Michael has been denied any hint of sexuality, the vulgarity of her words appears most peculiar. Here, the

audience member might express befuddlement and ask, was not Michael castrated already?

Rendered an asexual child, Michael seems to barely have a will of his own. Apart from his request to be called "Michael" instead of "Big Mike," his early attempts at formulating an opinion are mocked as utterances of unlearned stupidity. His affinity for rugby shirts, for instance, earns a corrective rebuke from S.J. Michael seems to meekly accept what other people desire. Does he want to go to the Christian academy? Does he want to play football? Does he even want to enroll in a university? His opinion is not sought, and when Sean buys Michael a pick-up truck, Sean explains the choice of vehicle to his wife saying, "Mike thinks he's a redneck." That is, Michael has no will of his own; he is just a sponge soaking up the tastes of those around him, a clean slate ready for the Tuohys' reeducational bootcamp.

The first lesson in Michael's structural readjustment program begins on the school playground. Noticing that Michael has no friends, S.J. instructs him to smile. Like a preteen Dr. Phil, S.J. explains, "It lets them know you're their friend." After taking up residence in the Tuohy mansion, Michael's training continues at multiple levels.

"The kids would tell you that we didn't parent them so much as brainwash them."

— Leigh Anne and Sean Tuohy



Leigh Anne teaches him how to shop, S.J. teaches him how to be social, and Miss Sue (Kathy Bates), his private tutor, teaches him how to be a good student.

This training also involves sports. To the coach's dismay, the ability to play football apparently does not automatically come with the size or skin color, and Michael has no understanding of the game. But it is not the coach who trains Michael to become a champion; it is the Tuohys. S.J. teaches Michael to exercise, and he explains the rules of the game using ketchup bottles and pepper shakers as props. Leigh Anne, on the other hand, provides the motivational spirit. Knowing about Michael's flair for self-sacrificial protection, she tells him to pretend his fellow players are actually members of the Tuohy family and to use his extraordinary "protective instincts" to defend his teammates just as he would defend Leigh Anne or S.J. from danger. This is the turning point in Michael's football career. Instructed to imagine football as another place where he can protect his white benefactors, Michael begins to excel for the first time in his life. Significantly, while the real-life

she spooks Michael flirting heavily with stereotypical notions of Black superstition.<sup>22</sup>

In the end, Michael chooses correctly. Allowed finally to exercise his own will, Michael accepts an offer to play football at Ole Miss. He has learned to want the things he is supposed to want and to desire the things he is supposed to desire. The involuntary has been made to appear voluntary, and Michael's free will conveniently coincides with what would have been chosen for him anyway.

Thus, Leigh Anne may tell her aristocratic friends that Michael is changing her, but oddly enough, her offensive dining partners' first perception was the correct one. With the film's conclusion, the only thing that has really changed is Michael. Having successfully graduated from the Tuohys' reeducation program, Michael is allowed to join the country club of privilege and power. His integration serves not to topple and transform the social order but merely to expand its reach.

It's worth noting that unlike some other post-9/11 Hollywood race dramas like *The Pursuit of Happyness*, *The*

"He could read and write and now blended so well into rich white Memphis that rich white Memphis almost forgot he was black."

— Michael Lewis<sup>10</sup>

Oher gives credit to people in the Black community who volunteered their time to help him learn to play sports from an early age, the film treats Michael's athleticism as something that did not take root until he came under the benevolent wing of the Tuohys.<sup>21</sup>

Eventually, Michael begins to take on the characteristics of a fully-functioning, post-racial citizen. He obtains both a driver's license and a car and becomes a legally adopted member of the Tuohy family. In addition, Michael's prowess on the football field earns him scholarship offers from a number of top universities. It is at this point that Michael is given the ultimate test and asked to choose which university he wants to attend. This decision represents the culmination of Michael's shock therapy regimen, the SAT of his post-racial reeducation.

The Tuohy family loves Ole Miss. Leigh Anne and Sean are both alumni. Miss Sue is also a Mississippi graduate, and, in an episode that also occurs in the book, she devilishly tries to dissuade Michael from attending the University of Tennessee by fabricating a myth about dead bodies buried under its field, the ease with which



*Blind Side* does not adopt a traditional bootstraps position in its treatment of Michael. Rather than promulgating the idea that society's destitute can improve their lot as a result of their own hard work alone, the film instead presents a prescriptive message to well-to-do audience members, bidding them to take it upon themselves to help the downtrodden. According to this view, those with power hold the keys to the kingdom, and it is up to people like the Tuohys, as good representatives of the capitalist order, to lift up those members of society who are seen as being unable to lift themselves.

Charity thus forms one of *The Blind Side*'s strongest and most frequently reoccurring motifs. At the beginning of the film, the football coach convinces Wingate's school board to admit Michael by appealing to Christian charity. Later on, when Sean admits that the leftovers from his fast-food kingdom are thrown into the garbage, S.J. suggests that he find a way to give them to the hungry. Charity even interrupts the Tuohys' lovemaking. As they lay in bed one evening with Sean covering his wife in kisses, she is distracted, thinking not of foreplay



but of potential charity projects. The film ends with Leigh Anne commenting on how easily Michael could have turned into just another statistic—a victim of drug wars or a drive-by shooting—had it not been for charity.

While charity may often seem like a humanitarian deed that transcends politics, this is simply not the case. Charity is political, and in *The Blind Side*, it is framed within very particular (i.e., neoliberal) parameters. Namely, charity is off-loaded onto the private sector, and there is no suggestion that these funds would be better directed towards existing social services or public welfare programs. In addition, while *The Blind Side* has plenty to say about how the Tuohys' wealth is spent, it has nothing to say about how it is made, and the film fails to acknowledge that the poverty it seeks to alleviate is intrinsically entangled in the same processes of capitalist accumulation that line the pockets of rich philanthropists like the Tuohys.

This contradiction is most apparent in the character of Sean. When appearing in the film, Sean is usually plopped on the sofa watching football. Eventually,



Michael learns the source of his fortune: fast-food restaurants. Sean owns eighty-five of them, including franchises of famous chains like Taco Bell, KFC, and Long John Silver's. Upon hearing this, Michael innocently asks S.J., "Is that why Mr. Tuohy don't have to go to work?" At this point, Sean interrupts the conversation and answers Michael with a smirk, explaining, "I'm working even when I'm not working." Or, as Lewis put it in the book, "[t]he restaurants ran themselves."<sup>23</sup>

Sean's apparent lack of work parrots one of the central injustices at the heart of capitalism—the fact that the people who make the most money are the ones who work when they are not working, those who own the labor of other people. *The Blind Side* tries to obscure this phenomenon, and there is no indication in the film that the accumulation of wealth in one sector is connected to the destitution of another, that the ghetto is tied to the gated community. As Slavoj Žižek puts it, "in order to give, first you have to take."<sup>24</sup> By ignoring this relationship, *The Blind Side* acts as the post-9/11 Hollywood race drama *par excellence*. It glorifies as a solution to our

problems the very thing that inflicts them.

Of course, none of these remarks is intended to suggest that the real-life Tuohys did not help the real-life Michael Oher. Indeed, his continued successes both on and off the football field demonstrate this not to be the case. However, as a model for social progress, *The Blind Side*'s message of cheerful giving is an individualist fantasy which perpetuates the processes causing disenfranchisement in the first place.

Although the focus of this essay has been on race and class, no assessment of *The Blind Side* is complete without at least briefly considering the film's treatment of gender. Some of the more celebratory responses to the film have singled out Bullock's Oscar-winning portrayal of Leigh Anne. While this performance has been praised for a variety of reasons—the real-life Leigh Anne, for instance, wrote that she loved Bullock's "fabulous ta-tas"<sup>25</sup>—most writers have emphasized how Bullock played Leigh Anne as a strong woman who refuses to conform to traditional notions of female subservience or docility. But before singing Bullock's praises too loudly, *The Blind Side*'s seemingly positive treatment of women must be seen in a broader context. Considered in this fashion, Bullock's strong performance quickly slips into its opposite, and what initially appears as progressive and forward-thinking turns out to be based on the perpetuation of old hierarchies and exclusions.

On this topic, I will restrict myself to three points. First, Leigh Anne's independence and mobility are sustained by rigid class structures. Leigh Anne does not have to work or cook. She has the freedom to shop and spend as much as she pleases because of her husband's business investments—his restaurants which magically run themselves. To see such independence positively would require us to forget all the shoulders upon which Leigh Anne stands. She can only afford to be a cheerful giver insofar as her husband continues exploiting countless other mothers and fathers as his underpaid and overworked employees. Thus, if the picture of strong womanhood painted by *The Blind Side* is to be considered feminist, it is not the feminism that has been articulated by collective struggles for emancipation; rather, it is the feminism of Sarah Palin.

Second, Leigh Anne's empowerment is premised on racial subordination, and even though her adoption of Michael is depicted through a post-racial lens, more traditional racial hierarchies become apparent during the scene in which Leigh Anne confronts a group of drug-dealing Black gang members. When the gang's leader makes sexually-threatening remarks, Leigh Anne silences him with a threat of her own: "If you so much as set foot downtown, you will be sorry. I'm in a prayer group with the D.A., I'm a member of the NRA, and I'm always packing." In this way, Leigh Anne overcomes her adversaries by appealing to her own privilege



(her connections with city officials) and by reinforcing Memphis' geographical lines of racial and economic segregation. Thus, *The Blind Side* resurrects the old image of the Black man as sexual predator, but whereas the lily-white maidens of yesteryear needed chivalrous white men (i.e., lynch mobs) to defend their honor, Leigh Anne is strong enough to defend herself. If this is progress, it is one purchased at a terrible price, and here, *The Blind Side* is not very different from those unfortunate advocates of women's suffrage who often couched their demands in the language of white supremacy.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, just as Michael's integration is predicated on his isolation, *The Blind Side's* version of female empowerment is conspicuously confined to Leigh Anne. Noteworthy here is the role of Leigh Anne's teenage daughter Collins—the only major character to have less lines than Michael. Collins is a mystery. She barely appears in the film, and while Leigh Anne, Sean, and S.J. each have their own roles to play, Collins' contribution to the story is negligible. She is Leigh Anne's shadow, the symptom marking the limits of Leigh Anne's empowerment.

Seen in this light, Leigh Anne performs a familiar function. Like Michael, she is used not to call the dominant order into question but to expand its reach. Whereas one absolves the status quo of racism and white supremacy, the other absolves it of sexism and misogyny. In both cases, this empowerment is predicated on very claustrophobic confines; Michael and Leigh Anne are emancipated only in the most individualistic of terms, and their place in the dominant order leaves wider practices of oppression safely intact.

Despite all of these drawbacks, however, there is still something important here worth retaining. With these two characters—the Black man and the white woman—a specter lurks in the background of the film's narrative, the possibility of these two characters coming together in radical solidarity. Rather than working to find an individual place for themselves in the existing regime of power, these two characters could very easily serve to call into question the systems of domination that have historically subordinated Blacks and women. While *The Blind Side* buries this potential and never lets it see the light of day, its phantom-like presence is there for anyone who wishes to uncover it. Just as an image of empowerment can easily slip into its opposite, so too can an image of subordination become a site for social struggle and emancipation.

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## Notes

- 1 Quoted in Wesley Pruden, "A Disillusioned Dog Ponders the Party," *Washington Times* (January 13, 2004).
- 2 Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Vintage, 1983 [1981]), 94.
- 3 Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Delta, 1968), 144.
- 4 Stuart Hall, "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity," in *Culture, Globalization, and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, ed. Anthony D. King (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997), 28.
- 5 To be sure, one can still spot the occasional subversive treasure in the midst of this maelstrom, a point I have previously argued in my essays on post-9/11 splatter horror and the "War on Terror" genre in *CineAction* issues 80 and 81.
- 6 Talia Buford, "'The Butler' Made Barbara Bush Cry," *Politico* (August 3, 2013).
- 7 Andrew Britton, "Blissing Out: The Politics of Reaganite Entertainment (1986)," in *Britton on Film: The Complete Film Criticism of Andrew Britton*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2009), 101.
- 8 Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic, 2003), 62.
- 9 Leigh Anne and Sean Tuohy with Sally Jenkins, *In a Heartbeat: Sharing the Power of Cheerful Giving* (New York: Henry Holt, 2010), 117.
- 10 Michael Lewis, "The Ballad of Big Mike," *New York Times Magazine* (September 24, 2006), 115.
- 11 Michael Lewis, *The Blind Side: Evolution of a Game*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).
- 12 Michael Oher with Don Yaeger, *I Beat the Odds: From Homelessness, to The Blind Side, and Beyond*, (New York: Gotham, 2011), 205.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 206. Oher's criticism also extends to Lewis' book. "I was concerned that many coaches or scouts who'd read *The Blind Side* were forming opinions about me before they got to know me. The book presented me as a slow learner instead of someone who had just never had much solid instruction." *Ibid.*, 181. Oher also claims that Lewis scarcely bothered to contact him when he was preparing to write *The Blind Side*. It was Oher who finally took it upon himself to call Lewis and ask, "Are you the guy who keeps asking every other person in the world questions about me when you could just come and ask me?" *Ibid.*, 203.
- 14 Tuohy, *In a Heartbeat*, 233.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 13-4, 242-3.
- 16 Quoted in W.E.B. DuBois, W.E.B., *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880*, (New York: Touchstone, 1995 [1935]), 260.
- 17 Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan: 2007).
- 18 Lewis, *The Blind Side*, 176, 182. In recent years, Lewis has employed his poisonous pen to argue that the economic crises in Europe are the result of cultural deficiencies. See my rejoinder to his attack on Iceland, "The Insolents Abroad," *CounterPunch* (March 27, 2009).
- 19 Ford made this claim while appearing on Amy Goodman's *Democracy Now!*. See "'Effective Evil' or Progressives' Best Hope? Glen Ford vs. Michael Eric Dyson on Obama Presidency," *Democracy Now!* (September 7, 2012).
- 20 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London: Routledge, 2002 [1964]), 16.
- 21 Oher, *I Beat the Odds*, 5, 41-2, 55-6, 97-8.
- 22 Lewis, *The Blind Side*, 170-1.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 65.
- 24 Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 20.
- 25 Tuohy, *In a Heartbeat*, 64.
- 26 Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*, 70-86.





*El día que me quieras/The Day That You'll Love Me*

# Che, Intertextuality, Memory, and the Power of Images

BY PATRICIA VARAS &  
CATHERINE ANN COLLINS

**T**he story began with a political act by the Bolivian army: the execution of a prisoner, the revolutionary Che Guevara. Seeking evidentiary proof of his death, they brought in journalists, including Freddy Alborta, to photograph the body. With its distinctive framing of the corpse, Alborta's photograph became a political act, an iconic commemoration that transformed the army's intent. Leandro Katz's 1997 documentary meditation on Alborta's image further reconstructs Che's memory; *El día que me quieras/The Day That You'll Love Me*, is a political act that merits careful attention.

When visual forms of representation strike a responsive chord in the viewer they function as commonplaces for constructing a community's history, interpreting its present, and conditioning conceptions of its future. Marita Sturkin reminds us that "[c]ultural memory is produced through representation"—photographs, novels, or film, for example.<sup>2</sup> Some visual representations become iconic when the particular choice of subject, frame, and

aesthetic tells a story that is both familiar and meaningful to the viewers, captures the essence of a people and time, and seems to tell it without the mediating influence of the photographer or gatekeepers who select and promote the image. Hariman and Lucaites argue that these images "are important precisely because they are accessible, undemanding images suited to mass mediated collective memory."<sup>3</sup>

In *El día que me quieras/The Day That You'll Love Me*<sup>4</sup> [1997] the interplay of images and other texts (written and musical) weave a seamless intertextual narrative that serve what Erll calls a premediating function for Leandro Katz's documentary: "The term 'premediation' draws attention to the fact that existent media which circulate in a given society provide schemata for future experience and its representation."<sup>5</sup> These images and texts frame Che's iconography and shape his collective memory. In this essay we consider how photographic and film depictions of Che Guevara interact with other cultural texts to shape his collective memory in the Argentinean poet and visual artist Leandro Katz's documentary film.

Iconic images are objects of memory, widely distributed and commodified in their reproduction, yet



able to sustain symbolic meaning. Katz questions the indexical value of Freddy Alborta's photographs of Che in death by opening up intertextual relations and interpretations through his documentary. Following Maurice Halbwachs's definition of collective memory and the role images play in it, we argue that Katz explores the power of Che's representation and his legacy to mediate collective recollection by employing a documentary style that harkens back to Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* [1955], and by focusing on a single news photograph as did Goddard and Gorin in their agitprop *Letter to Jane* [1972].

Ernesto Guevara de la Serna Lynch (1928-1967), better known as Che, is a figure of mythic proportions. Both loved and reviled, his image has gone through changes that have implied adoption and rejection, movements that have converged in paradoxical manners. In art and literature he has been treated with eloquence and even transformed into kitsch at times, reducing his image to "a pretty, harmless, meaningless symbol."<sup>6</sup> Yet, to all people Che represents antiestablishment, protest, non-conformity. Katz's efforts to shape Che's life and struggle

to suit the notions of diverse and competing communities and ideologies are part of the construction of a collective remembrance of the man and revolutionary who long ago became a global figure.

Collective memory is much more than the compilation of individual recollections. Collective memory has the value of strengthening the sense of community and of reaffirming social ties. Douglass and Vogler define it as a communal experience intensely shared, "the sum of a collection of separate but similar individual experiences."<sup>7</sup>

Elizabeth Jelin maintains that "individual experiences do not transform into experiences with a meaning without the presence of cultural discourses, and these are always collective" (our translation).<sup>8</sup> The immortality of Che's ideals and deeds have been imbedded in collective memory, thanks to intertextual and cultural filters that keep bringing him back as an ever present presence.

The iconic image that Katz probes, which sparked a collective memory of Che Guevara, is Alborta's 10 October 1967 photograph that confirmed the death of Che Guevara and made bearing witness a transnational phenomenon when it was published around the world. Katz's *The Day* begins with a title in red and white reading, "An infinite number of things"—a line from Borges's parable "The Witness" that considers what is lost when any man dies. The film cuts to Alborta's black and white shot of the dead Che, then the title, "A few years ago I got a print of this photograph and I began to fragment it attempting to understand its power." We are shown three fragmented parts of the photograph mounted on a red

background. A third title appears, "I was so impressed by certain details that I decided to look for the photographer, Freddy Alborta in La Paz, Bolivia." The film cuts to an interview Katz conducts with Alborta, who is looking at a series of photographs that he had taken over the course of his career.

The viewer is retold the content of Che's farewell letter to Fidel Castro and is informed that Che's body disappears. This three-minute introduction is the extent of the contextualization of the events leading up to the iconic photograph of Che in death. This is significant because photographic meaning depends on contextualization; Katz interprets Alborta's image by the present, rather than solely by the past in which it was shot.

As Andrea Noble argues, photographs in media are accompanied by texts that shape them, leading us to believe that "text, rather than image" carries "the burden of communicative and evidential authority."<sup>9</sup> Noble, however, points to exceptions to conventional belief when she explains, "Occasionally, however, an image, or a set of images, transcend this secondary, supportive role and, owing to the confluence of extraordinary visual impact and the circumstances surrounding their production and dissemination, constitute the story itself."<sup>10</sup> This is the argument Katz constructs in his film through choice in documentary style, formal strategies of color versus black and white film, and intertextual manipulations of high and low cultural discourses.

The documentary style that a filmmaker adopts, whether direct address, *cinéma vérité*, interview, or self reflexive, privileges meaning through voice, narrative structure, and choices in degrees of transparency or mediation. These formal decisions about the visibility of mediation influence the audience's perception of the truth of the argument and evidence that is offered. Katz builds his argument initially by quickly moving into a mode characteristic of compilation/interview documentaries that add historical footage and similar indicators to corroborate the testimony of witnesses. For Katz, this includes both the black and white still images that Alborta took and some black and white film footage from the press conference immediately following Che's death. All of these historic representations give credibility to Alborta's testimony about what he saw and what was important. Barry Dornfeld argues that intercutting historical material with contemporary interviews achieves a "malleability and potential for credibility and authority," and thus is "a form well suited for overtly political documentaries."<sup>11</sup>

Another formal strategy becomes apparent just over three minutes into the film when Katz employs what becomes a continuing series of alternating, carefully interposed scenes, in color of Andean people and villages, and in black and white of Che's death scene. In this compositional juxtaposition—color vs. black and white, life vs. death—meaning within the documentary



Leandro Katz



is constructed through the negotiation between Katz's documentary and media circulation. Katz examines Alborta's photograph, exploring how meaning can be simultaneously over-determined—a redundant or controlling way of framing the narrative—through a dissection of Alborta's black and white image of Che's corpse, and underdetermined—narrative framing that encourages the viewer to interpret—through his newly shot color footage of Andean people enacting rituals that evoke Che's ideological message.

Alternating color and black and white footage is a formal strategy made familiar in *Night and Fog*, where filmed scenes of the present, of abandoned German concentration camps, now drained of terror, of shots of fields and abandoned brick buildings presented as pastoral images and always in color, stand in sharp relief to still black and white images and film footage from the camps where shots of emaciated corpses abound in the black and white past. In *Night and Fog* the seemingly pastoral becomes ironic, as the two formal elements (black and white vs. color shots) are read against one another. In the case of Katz's film, the color images are read as hopeful because through them Katz controls the way we read the black and white death scene: not as the crucifixion of Che but as a prefiguring of the resurrection—Che as the everlasting Messiah, or as we shall see in Berger's essay, Mantegna's life-giving Christ.

The documentary, however, is much more than a deconstruction of Alborta's photograph; it presents the director's own reactions to how Che is remembered, through original intertextual relations established between the photograph and several discourses and texts. Katz presents the highly complex relationship of the real and the image, of Barthes's "what was there"<sup>12</sup> and its context showing that

what lies "behind" the paper or "behind" the image is not reality—the referent—but reference: a subtle web of discourse through which realism is enmeshed in a complex fabric of notions, representations, images, attitudes, gestures and modes of action which function as everyday know-how, "practical ideology", norms within and through which people live their relation to the world.<sup>13</sup>

In his original recontextualization of Alborta's photograph of the dead Che, Katz conducts what Skoller has called a "radically unconventional" film and "a work of mourning in the form of an investigative elegy."<sup>14</sup>

The Alborta photograph confirms Che's body was laid out for inspection in Vallegrande; by thus establishing Alborta was there, the photograph has evidentiary power. At the same time, however, this freeze frame immediately makes the photograph not Che, but an image. Even though dead, Che is for many alive in his

revolutionary program and in his symbolic image for the locals that walked by his body and heard of his death. Elizabeth Edwards explains that with photographs the "physical subject, the referent, itself becomes indivisible from its symbolic or metaphorical meaning; the symbol becomes reality, and in this process the signifier and the signified collapse into each other."<sup>15</sup> In a Foucauldian sense, images of Che are heterotopian;<sup>16</sup> in looking at his photograph and memorializing him, we break with real time.

The global or transnational quality of this photograph meant that the Bolivian army's plan backfired. What was intended to be a warning for guerrillas and insurgent movements became an iconic image that awakened a series of responses that went from outrage at the sheer violation of the prisoners and the disrespectful treatment of the cadavers to veneration of the Christ-like Che; the latter response confirmed his dreams were not dead. In this manner the photograph was no longer solely evidence of the death of a guerrilla fighter in the Bolivian jungle, but a symbol that would be filled with varying meanings throughout time. As Tagg suggests: "The indexical nature of the photograph—the causative link between the prephotographic referent and the sign—is therefore highly complex, irreversible, and can guarantee nothing at the level of meaning."<sup>17</sup>

Photography, particularly in the case of Che in death, presents a double representativity that moves between the real and the nostalgic: it captures the past as it was and becomes evidence of an event that we may wish to memorialize; at the same time its spectral quality allows it to bring back to the present someone who is gone, dead.

Katz responds to the theoretical question posed by Erll: "What is it that turns *some* media (and not others) into powerful 'media of cultural memory,' meaning media which create and mold collective images of the past?"<sup>18</sup> In effect, how and why do we remember Che?

In this manner photography connects in a primal way with memory not history, with a past event, always relived, re-experienced in the ever-present. The transcendent quality of the photograph is due to an act of interpretation conducted by the photographer Freddy Alborta, who confides to Katz:

I had the impression that I was photographing a Christ. ... It was not a cadaver that I was photographing but something... extraordinary. That was my impression, and that is perhaps why I took the photographs with so much care: to demonstrate that it was not a simple cadaver.<sup>19</sup>

While Alberto Korda's photograph and ubiquitous image of Che, *Guerrillero Heroico*, was declared "the most famous photograph in the world"<sup>20</sup> by the Maryland Institute College of Art in 2001, the photograph taken



by Freddy Alborta of Che's corpse is no less iconic. Margaret Randall has said: "This is a photograph that has become a point of departure for conversation, analyses, and for essayists and artists who will take it further, pushing the limits of meaning and suggesting new ways of seeing: image as truth, manipulation, symbol, representation or window."<sup>21</sup> Katz's thirty-minute documentary deconstructs Alborta's photograph, challenges the conflicting readings of Che's image, and attempts a reinterpretation of his legacy as he tries to understand and explain its power and how it contributed to supporting a mass mediated collective memory of Che.

Katz interrogates John Berger's well-known essay, "Che Guevara: The Moral Factor," with its indispensable reading that was among the first responses to the photograph. The essay draws the first comparisons to the two works of art with which the photograph is now regularly associated: Mantegna's *Dead Christ* and Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Professor Tulp*. These two works of art bring forth the possibility of interpreting Alborta's photograph as an iconic image immersed in a discourse dominated by opposing life and death feelings enveloping Che. Even though Mantegna's and Rembrandt's paintings are far apart in time and theme, they both find in the dead Che an eerie echo, an uncanny doubling, that Berger was able to locate, and that subsequent viewers, having read about the likeness, find difficult to miss, as Alborta corroborates: "I believe this is not only my impression, but that of many others who have made the comparison with the body of a Christ."<sup>22</sup> Mantegna's *Dead Christ*, with the implied life-giving sacrifice and resurrection, sharply contrasts with Rembrandt's scientific *The Anatomy Lesson of Professor Tulp*. Berger's essay,

while offering a close analysis of factors within Alborta's image that make the photograph iconic, also serves a premediating function for the documentary, framing Che's iconography and shaping his collective memory.

Berger's interpretation fosters transcendence. By drawing comparisons to famous European works of art he introduces metaphors and allegorical interpretations brought about by an "emotional correspondence"<sup>23</sup> that the English writer felt would grab the imagination of the 60s in an everlasting manner, and which have influenced Katz's framing of Che's life. Mantegna's painting elucidates the first mythic and emotional dimension, while Rembrandt's emphasizes a second reading through the need for interpretation of evidence, of facts. Although the Bolivian army staged Che's body in the laundry room in Vallegrande, Che's dead body acquired a beatific meaning that was further emphasized by the inhabitants of the village, who started talking about the deaths of the guerrilleros and of Che's Christ-like image.<sup>24</sup> This mythic and life-giving interpretation of Che as Christ, as Mestman suggests, is not the result solely of the composition of the photograph, films, and records but arises "fundamentally, from the referent itself."<sup>25</sup>

The second reading, provided by Rembrandt's painting of the dissection in Professor Tulp's anatomy lesson, accentuates the relevance of the visual facts underscoring the army's warning to the defeated subversives and would-be followers of Che, while also framing Katz's autopsy of the photograph. The body is laid out as evidence to be recognized; confrontation with death and confirmation of identity is to be forced. Forensic practice determined that it would be best to leave Che's eyes open as a more effective manner of guaranteeing recognition.



Left: Mantegna's *Dead Christ*

Above: Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Professor Tulp*



Despite the importance of public acceptance of the corpse as that of Che, the Bolivian army would not allow his brother to see the body, one more incident of inhumane, disrespectful treatment, echoed by Katz's quotation from *The Great Rebel: Che Guevara in Bolivia* at the end of the film:

there is a human truth which gives rise above any subjectivism: A man, a sick and wounded prisoner, was killed without any semblance of justice when he was in the hands of those whose duty it was to rigorously guard his physical safety. Beyond any moral law and above any legal principles, the truth is that an elementary rule of war had been violated: A prisoner is always sacred.

In the end, Che's open eyes only emphasized his innocent appearance. Alborta tells Katz, "[his eyes open] helped me to photograph not a common cadaver but a person who seemed to be alive and gave the impression of being a Christ."<sup>26</sup> Mantegna's life-giving painting prevails over Rembrandt's composition, in which evidence and death dominate. Alborta's and Berger's impressions shape the way Che's death would be received and remembered around the world and through time. Katz's film allows us to understand the transcendent quality of the photograph and how it has become an icon of collective memory.

While for Skoller the filmic essay and revisiting of Alborta's picture is an act of mourning, we think Katz is instead undertaking a deconstruction and interpretation of the past through the present use of technology, seeking to construct continuity and building a space for memorialization. Katz shows us Che the man, perfectly aware that it might be impossible to divest him from his heroic figure, as the last image of him in the film is the iconic, young, handsome Che. As Huyssen reminds us, commodification does not mean the banalization of history; we must be open to the many "possibilities of representing the real and its memories."<sup>27</sup> It is important to avoid the old dichotomy of high and low culture and accept that memory culture may use as many and diverse tools for creating recollection as possible, because "...memory culture fulfills an important function in the current transformation of temporal experience that has followed in the wake of the new media's impact on human perception and sensibility."<sup>28</sup>

Katz also uses a series of literary and cultural texts to frame his thoughts about Che's death as triggered by Alborta's photograph and to reflect the power of the photograph itself as "a form of argumentation."<sup>29</sup> At the same time the viewer experiences these visual manipulations of image, he or she hears a portion of Borges's parable, "The Witness": "In a stable which is almost in the shadow of an old stone church lying amidst the other animals a man seeks death."<sup>30</sup> Katz paraphrases

Borges's parable, and repeats lines and phrases in a poetic tone, recapturing a lyric feeling in his presentation of the lonely death of Che, betrayed in the countryside of Bolivia. The solitary man lies ready to die, without achieving the victorious end that every fighter dreams about. His defeat is intensely evoked by the stable, the animals' odors, the bells tolling, and the idea that once he is gone "some thing, or an infinite number of things, dies and is lost along with anyone's death."<sup>31</sup> This parable reminds us of our mortality, and that regardless of historic deeds (Junín) or mythic ones (Troy, Woden, pagan rites) one's death means the end of one's consciousness. In this instance the fact of Che's death takes over, enveloping the viewer with an unmistakable reality and sense of loss: Che is dead.

This feeling of hopelessness is overcome, however. Studying Che's death photograph is a moment of remembrance, since Che's death is not an allegory of Christ's passion, but an evocation of his role as Messiah (Mantegna's life-giving Christ), his ability to inspire and his becoming an example to follow, as embodied in his idea of the "hombre nuevo" ("new man"). His utopianism is nothing to be ashamed of and regardless of where his effigy appears, on t-shirt or flag, the meaning manages to persist. Katz, through a series of strategies, repetitions, and varied texts, includes us in his perceptions, as Berger previously did through his essay, and Alborta through his photograph, each making us part of their reflections and encouraging us to continue with ours. As Taylor notes, photographs "invite viewers to reflect not only on the status of photographic evidence but also on their own relation to the reality it represents."<sup>32</sup> Berger, Alborta, and Katz each create texts, which premeditate the others, ensuring how society will continue to experience and represent them in the creation of a collective memory.

Katz has chosen the contrasting texts of Borges's parable and Carlos Gardel's tango, "El día que me quieras," to emphasize intertextual connections in his study of the photograph. Although both Borges and Gardel are Argentinean artists, they represent very different forms of cultural expressions. Jorge Luis Borges, the famous writer of short stories and poetry, known for his philosophical and hermetic art, is the epitome of difficult, avant garde literature, high art at its best. Gardel is the iconic popular figure of tango. While "The Witness" makes us ponder life and death and what comes about after one's demise, the tango "The Day You Love Me" is a love song. Although tangos can be melodramatic tours de force in which nostalgia for the homeland, or for the beloved is the main theme, this tango is simply a song from the heart, a desire for love to be returned some day. In "The Witness" and in "The Day You Love Me" the "black eyes" are features of both the old man in the stable and of the beloved. This figure conflates both works and allows us to imagine that the subject of both is Che.



That the tango gives the title to the visual essay makes us realize its relevance. It is not a whimsical, popular gesture from the filmmaker, but it has a deeper acknowledgement that humanizes Che. His immortality is but an invention; he is dead as Alborta's photograph reminds us. However, as a beloved who returns our love, the continuity of the moment, that romantic encounter is what remains. Che is present when we love him back. This is the case in the rituals conducted by the Andean people in the film; they are reenactments, ceremonies that return Che's love. Katz breaks with the classical narrative when he introduces these fragmented images of Andean people marching into an envisioned future inspired by Che's ideals. The striking color images are silent and lyrical, exalting the power of observation and movement while the soundtrack serves to increase the ritualistic composition of the imagery. The choice to include the staged symbolic sequences reinforces the indexical and iconic quality of Katz's documentary and Alborta's photograph. As Chanan reminds us, "the photographic image [and the documentary representation] ... is both index and icon at the same time: an automatic rendering of the scene and a pictorial resemblance full of associations and connotations."<sup>13</sup>

The documentary's argument is that the gift of Che's revolutionary activity and love for humankind is within us, as values or principles in constant renewal, not lying outside, reified in any form of icon or fetish. Che embodied the "new man" he had discussed in his essay "Socialism and the New Man in Cuba" (1965). For him the creation and maintenance of this man who had a revolutionary commitment in daily life represented one of the fundamental challenges for socialism. This new man was always in the making, based on a process that depended on education and an ongoing commitment to action.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Katz's mediation gives new life to an old idea and argues that Che's beliefs transcend time and place, still providing inspiration.

The seamless weaving of all these texts: Alborta's photograph, Berger's essay, Borges's parable, and Gardel's tango makes for a complex film which echoes the dissonance originally established by Mantegna's life giving painting and Rembrandt's darker proposition of death as an inevitable fact worthy of "dissection." The interview with Alborta, the images of Andean people, the parable, and the tango lyrics all act as direct witnesses; these discourses further mediate the photograph. Of course even in interview/compilation documentaries, witnesses (whether images, music, or people) do not tell their own story. When Alborta tells the interviewer that Che's corpse seemed alive, Katz employs visual text to reinforce this perception. For example, the director uses the segmented head of Che, eyes open in the photograph, and in a three shot sequence enlarges the head, making it appear to come closer to the viewer. Interviews too are selected with an end in mind: they are edited and

arranged to argue a particular perspective. Such mediation is apparent when Katz furthers the mythic dimension of Che by intercutting color film of the Bolivian countryside accompanied by a voiceover reading from Borges: "and the world will be a little poorer once this man has died." Borges's parable argues that unless there is a memory, when the last witness dies, the historical events die with him; Katz, however, shows us Andean people carrying the red banner in procession suggesting that their actions provide the collective memory to keep Che's message from dying with him, reawakening Che's revolutionary ideals.

Alborta's photograph, then, mediated by parables and songs with strong cultural resonances, gains agency in the documentary when it becomes the associational link between the past and the present. As the viewer remembers (in proscribed ways) a version of the past, he/she is invited to celebrate a reinvigoration of Che's message through the Andean peoples' celebration. Katz gives life to an old idea by visually telling his viewer that Che's still survives. This subtle form of arguing for Che's ideals is an alternative to the direct assaults on the viewer more characteristic of Third Cinema films like *La hora de los hornos* [1968].

The ability to bring together these apparently dissonant discourses speaks highly of Katz's inventiveness and complex structuring of his documentary. His filmic activity stresses the importance of analysis, evidence, and dissection as in Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Professor Tulp*. At the same time, Che's revolutionary discourse is better understood as a life-giving love story better represented by Mantegna's *Dead Christ*. The meaning created by Katz's documentary, other texts, and media circulation undoubtedly pays homage to the idea of life, the "new man," and associated ideals triumphing over death and facts.

### **Intertextuality, Memory and the Power of Images**

Katz documentary updates the politically dated manifestoes of the 60s, yet remains faithful to an agenda that is still important, as Katz reaches out to his audience and addresses issues of power structure in *The Day*. The Katz documentary, nevertheless, conflates other practices that deviate from the collective work of Third Cinema. His personal vision and the original connections he makes in his intertextual discussion of the photograph owe as well to the European cinema d'auteur. In what Michael Chanan calls "new wave documentaries,"<sup>15</sup> authorship is not a byword and technology is significant. Katz poses ideological questions about Che and embeds him strongly within a Latin American culture and tradition, yet he is also an international artist whose art connects global perspectives to Latin America. The documentary was linked to Katz's art installation *Project for: The Day You'll Love Me* that was shown at the School of the Art



Institute of Chicago. The installation, photographs, and film explore the facts and manipulations of Che's death, and probe the viability of his enduring message.<sup>46</sup>

Essentially, Katz's documentary is a metacommentary on another piece of visual art: Alborta's photograph. We believe this metacommentary is Katz's most important aesthetic and political message. There is a double encoding, which refers to the indexical and iconic power of these media. On the one hand they share their complex relationship with reality, their power as evidence: the indexical. On the other hand they both are artistic endeavors, defined by their contexts and associations, the iconic, which is what Katz proves in his intertextual interpretation of the photograph. The indexical and the iconic deviate in the photograph's inability to contain it all and in its strong connection to the past, contrasting with the polysemic nature of film that allows *The Day* to move away from the past and reassert the importance of the present by moving from the interview format and black and white images to the colorful movement of the Andean peoples, or revisitations of Borges's text and Gardel's tango. Katz is not only representing history but supplementing and amending it, juxtaposing poetry, songs, voices that have a material and cultural value as they evoke the culture that has created them. In the present, Che's utopian message is kept alive, and as Huyssen warns us "perhaps it is time to remember the future."<sup>47</sup>

Starting with an iconic photograph that simultaneously mythologized and humanized Che, Katz argues that Che's message is transformative. Skoller suggests that Katz and Guzmán, like other Latin American experimental filmmakers, "take up the question that is at the center of postmodern historiographic concerns: the recognition that there are historical events that by their nature defy representability but nevertheless play an important part in the ways we understand the present."<sup>48</sup> Katz's film asks the spectator to read the past and present against each other. While commodification of the past can be a threat as in the more capitalistic nations, it is less so in many Latin American countries because remembering and the past have a less nostalgic function and a more hands-on purpose. Katz accomplishes a shift in his interpretation and deconstruction of Alborta's photograph by reading/interpreting the image as grounded in the reality it was taken from and building connections with texts that develop an affect that allow Katz to return Che after a long transnational trip conducted thanks to time and the media.

Sontag is correct when she says that photographs do not convey a stable meaning, but rather one that changes as contexts change, because it is always "an object in a context."<sup>49</sup> Certainly the Bolivian military failed to control the meaning of the image to evidence that Che and the revolution were dead. Alborta's photograph shaped the subsequent responses to it while Berger added an interpretation. The shaping continued in Katz's

dissection of the image, in his re-contextualization of it through artifacts from literary and popular culture, in an interview with the original photographer, and in staged footage of Andean people engaging in rituals that suggest Che's remembrance through a collective memory.

The memory debate in Latin American countries is a highly political one. A region that is grappling with the legacy of bloody dictatorships, of corruption, and violence sees in the act of remembering an affirmation of responsibility and a path to justice. That is, because memory is selective and acquired it is not only always accompanied by forgetting but it is also seldom truly experienced or lived; what Andreas Huyssen calls "imagined memories" are similar to what Alison Landsberg refers to as "prosthetic memories."<sup>40</sup> While for Landsberg these memories are as vital and ethical as lived ones, for Huyssen these un-experienced memories are more easily forgettable.<sup>41</sup> With *The Day* this distantiation between the mass-market memory and the lived memory is elided. By choosing texts that speak to a vast audience familiar with Latin American culture and by erasing differences between high and low culture Katz creates an active space of memorialization. This is his contribution to rethinking Che as a historic and mythic figure. Katz creates a memory culture that values Che from the present and projects him into the future, through the Andean peoples' actions. His documentary does not fall into nostalgia about the past and the unfulfilled promises, a common and tempting action when remembering Che. This premediation ensures the circulation of Alborta's photograph and of Che's image as well as their interpretations, determining how people remember him and his ideals.

The power of Alborta's photograph as a form of cultural production of collective memory and meaning making is undeniable. Katz's understanding of its force seems to support his intention to dwell more on the positive rather than on the violent, traumatic, and degrading death of Che. The way Katz captures Che's memory does not shun making an ideological statement that time has certainly not depoliticized.<sup>42</sup>

Katz answers the *unless* of Borges's parable about the value of memory: "...and yet some thing, or an infinite number of things, dies and is lost along with anyone's death, *unless* [italics ours] there actually exists a universal memory, as the theosophists have speculated."<sup>43</sup> In the collective memory and rituals of the Andean people the "infinite number of things" (the beginning title of the documentary) are given life today by Che. The documentary reaffirms a re-politicization of Alborta's original photograph. Alborta's photograph and Katz's interrogation of it privilege a message of hope in our reading of this film. The final images of a smiling Che and the young Andean girl's bouquet of red roses seem to argue that the iconic Che and his message are alive in the people despite his death.





Like the still image it deconstructs, the film is also contextualized by other media against which it is read, by the way narrative structures are interpreted, and by what has currency in documentary and the power of images at a given point in time. All of these factors explain how Alborta's photograph and Katz's film shape the cultural and collective memory of Che.

#### Notes

- 1 We would like to thank Kenneth Nolley from Film Studies for his careful reading of this essay and his perceptive suggestions.
- 2 Marita Sturkin, *Tangled Memories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 8-9.
- 3 Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 2.
- 4 From now on *The Day*.
- 5 Astrid Erll, "Literature, Film and the Mediality of Cultural Memory," in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, eds. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 392.
- 6 David Kunzle, "Chesucristo: Fusions, Myths, and Realities," *Latin American Perspectives* 159 (2008): 99.
- 7 Ana Douglass and Thomas A. Vogler, Introduction, in *Witness and Memory. The Discourse of Trauma*, eds. Ana Douglass and Thomas A. Vogler (New York: Routledge, 2003), 17.
- 8 Elizabeth Jelin, *Los trabajos de la memoria* (Madrid: Siglo Veintiuno, 2002), 37.
- 9 Andrea Noble, "Recognizing Historical Injustice through Photography: Mexico 1968," *Theory, Culture and Society* 27, no. 7-8 (2010): 188.
- 10 Ibid., 189.
- 11 Barry Dornfeld, "Dear America: Transparency, Authority, and Interpretation in a Vietnam War Documentary," in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, eds. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 283.
- 12 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 88-89.
- 13 John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation, Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Amherst: The U of Massachusetts P, 1988), 100.
- 14 Jeffrey Skoller, "The Future's Past: Re-imagining the Cuban Revolution," *Afterimage* 26, no. 5 (1999): n.p.
- 15 Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology, and Museums* (New York: Berg, 2001), 8.
- 16 Michel Foucault, "Different Spaces," in *Aesthetics, Methods, and Epistemology*, vol 2, ed. James D. Faubion, Trans. Robert Hurley (New York: New Press, 1998), 175-185.
- 17 Tagg, *Burden of Representation*, 3.
- 18 Astrid Erll, "Literature, Film," 390.
- 19 Katz, "Interview with Freddy Alborta," in *The Ghosts of Ñancahuazú*, ed. Leandro Katz (Buenos Aires: Viper Tongue Books, 2010), 211.
- 20 Che Guevara, *Famous Pictures: The Magazine* (June 20, 2010) accessed August 1, 2011.
- 21 Margaret Randall, Los Fantasmas De Ñancahuazú, *Chasqui* 39, no. 2 (2010): 220.
- 22 Katz, "Interview with Freddy Alborta," 211.
- 23 John Berger, "Che Guevara: The Moral Factor," *The Urban Review* 8 (1975): 203.
- 24 In her review of several biographies of Che, Franco explains how his hair became a relic and a "secular saint" was born. She also quotes Anderson and tells that among a number of women in Vallegrande the impression that Che resembled Christ quickly spread. Jean Franco, "A Ghost Dance on the Fields of the Cold War," in *The Ghosts of Ñancahuazú*, ed. Leandro Katz (Buenos Aires: Viper Tongue Books, 2010), 248.
- 25 Mariano Mestman contextualizes the photograph and explains how it corresponded with the Christian Latin American iconographical tradition and the ideology of Liberation Theology, which at the Conference at Medellín declared "opting for the poor" in "The Last Sacred Image of the Latin American Revolution," in *The Ghosts of Ñancahuazú*, ed. Leandro Katz (Buenos Aires: Viper Tongue Books, 2010), 264.
- 26 Alborta mentions to Katz how bringing out the magazine to compare Che's face "bothered him" (Leandro Katz, "Interview with Freddy Alborta," 211) and Kunzle makes an adept comparison of the Bolivian officers pointing to the bullet holes in Che's chest to the "ostentatio vulneri, the demonstration of Christ's wounds, or a doubting Thomas poking his finger in the side of the resurrected Christ" (David Kunzle, "Chesucristo: Fusions, Myths, and Realities," *Latin American Perspectives* 159 (2008): 107).
- 27 Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts. Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 19.
- 28 Ibid., 21.
- 29 Mestman, "Last Sacred Image," 263.
- 30 Borges's stable makes us think of Berger mistakenly putting Che's body in such a place. Jorge Luis Borges, 2007, "The Witness."
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 John Taylor, *Body Horror: Photojournalism, Catastrophe and War* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 5.
- 33 Chanan, *The Politics of Documentary*, 4.
- 34 For further discussion on Che's essay see, Catherine Collins, David Douglass, and Patricia Varas, "Metaphor and argument in Ernesto Che Guevara's 'Socialism and the New Man in Cuba'," *Proceedings of the Fifth Conference of the International Society for the Study of Argumentation*. Eds. Franz H. van Eemeren, et al. (Amsterdam: Sic Sat, 2003), 1023-1028.
- 35 Michael Chanan, *The Politics of Documentary* (London: British Film Institute, 2007), 11.
- 36 See Franco, "A Ghost Dance," 243-252.
- 37 Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 29.
- 38 Jeffrey Skoller, *Shadows, Specters, Shards: Making History in Avant Garde Films* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xvii.
- 39 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977), 106.
- 40 See Alison Landsberg, "Memory, Empathy and the Politics of Identification," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 22 (2009): 221-229.
- 41 Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, 17.
- 42 See Sontag, *On Photography* who also acknowledges that the original photograph, "is unforgettable" indicating "its potential for being depoliticized, for becoming a timeless image," 107.
- 43 Borges, "The Witness," n.p.



Super-Perception:

# Minorities Depicted in Comic Book Filmic Adaptations



BY MICHAEL LIPINER

"Comics have long been more open to racially diverse characters than some other forms of art."<sup>1</sup> For the past 15 years, superhero comic book filmic adaptations have focused more intensely and realistically on the depiction of *minorities*<sup>2</sup>. Traditionally, most comic book characters have been Caucasian males. However, in recent years, a more competent awareness has been raised about specific minority groups that was either previously stereotyped or excluded altogether. It is therefore worthwhile to draw attention to the ways in which processes of change are currently impacting the production and reception of minority representations, especially in the art of film, our most popular culture<sup>3</sup>. Although minorities are still underrepresented in the comic book universe, including its filmic adaptations, they are nonetheless obtaining more exposure and gaining the recognition they deserve.

Before and during the Second World War, unsophisticated superhero comics flourished where the Axis

threat was countered by patriotic superheroes that provided "fantasies of superhuman power."<sup>4</sup> In subsequent decades, comics "developed characters whose superpowers made them social outcasts who had to prove their loyalty and utility to their fellow citizens."<sup>5</sup> As a result, many comic book characters were either forced to assimilate into American culture or rebel against mainstream society by forging a new identity with special powers and abilities. However, before the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, films did not sufficiently emphasize what these comic books conveyed.

At the start of the new millennium, the *X-Men* film series pioneered a more realistic (and symbolic) depiction of minorities. Professor Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters is shown as a stable home to a transformative and diverse society of mutants that consist of different races, ethnicities, and national origins. They strive to gain acceptance by non-mutants (regular homo sapiens) as they ironically protect the human race from evil. Moreover, the X-Men correspond to the 'ghetto' mentality; "the isolation of mutants and their alienation from 'normal' society could be read as a parable of the



alienation of any minority.”<sup>6</sup> In doing so, the films “evoke subtly and blatantly other persecuted minorities” that raise certain sociopolitical issues amid a predominantly white and male-dominated society.

To begin with, “*X-Men* (2000) reflects the assimilationist aims, ethnic anxieties, and liberal idealism of the first-generation Jewish Americans who created the original superheroes featured in Marvel Comic Books.” Both *X-Men* (2000) and *X-Men: First Class* (2011) open with Magneto as a young Jewish boy who is separated from his parents by the Nazis at the Auschwitz concentration camp. Director Brian Singer even “explicitly pins a yellow star to the young Magneto after years of comics that couldn’t quite bear to say whether he was Jewish or a gypsy.”<sup>7</sup> The mutant boy is forced to use his powers as a way to deal with his justified hurt and anger. “The *X-Men* follow a mutant who advocates acculturation and the channeling of their superhuman abilities to defend humankind. Bryan Singer, the Jewish director of the movie, has retained the encounter with the Holocaust and the struggle against bigotry as key themes in his film.”<sup>10</sup>

These scenes depicting the plight of the Jewish people in both films’ expositions translate into the persecution and hardships of other minority characters in the subsequent film series. They effectively symbolize a post-racially divided, 21<sup>st</sup> century society that continues to deal with tolerance and social justice. As an oppressed social group, many *X-Men* mutants are orphans or ostracized children. They isolate themselves, which “intensifies the secret identity theme but also reflects an existentialist form of individualism.”<sup>11</sup> Without parents, these mutants want to belong to a group that affirms their worth as a member, which attracts them to “a family of freaks”<sup>12</sup> possessing special powers. “Orphaned when he is separated from his parents there [at Auschwitz], the future villain Magneto devotes his postwar life to preventing Homo sapiens from ever stigmatizing mutants like himself ever again.”<sup>13</sup> In this way, “the notion of

highly special individuals forced by fate to live together has special resonance.”<sup>14</sup>

What is more, certain historical sociopolitical subtexts exist. “Professor Xavier and his *X-Men*, who sought accommodation with homo sapiens, recalled moderate elements of the civil rights movement of the 1960s as exemplified by Martin Luther King, Jr.”<sup>15</sup> In contrast, there are militant mutants; “Magneto and his Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, who disdained to cooperate with homo sapiens resembled increasingly radical elements: Malcolm X, black nationalism, and the Nation of Islam.”<sup>16</sup> Throughout the film series, much like their historical counterparts, the two leaders—Professor X and Magneto—respect their different ideologies and engage in philosophical arguments about the human race while both helping and battling one another. “Starting from the conflict between the two, Singer’s movie becomes a plea for cultural and political tolerance.”<sup>17</sup>

Overall, “the *X-Men* adopted a liberal political stance stressing cooperation among individuals and minorities rather than conflict, moderation in politics rather than extremism, and the right of each American to social recognition and economic opportunity”<sup>18</sup> For example, when the mutants are threatened with annihilation by the menacing Stryker in *X2: X-Men United* (2004), Professor X and Magneto join forces—just as they do in the prequel *X-Men: First Class*—when called upon to save mutants (and, in turn, homo sapiens) from total oblivion. However, their sociopolitical differences often clash, which leads to violent confrontations: in *X-Men* (2000) the American government proposes a radical Mutant Registration Act that threatens their societal rights; in *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2007) mutants are strongly encouraged to physically transform themselves into “normal” homo sapiens with a new cure; and in *X-Men: First Class* (2011) the mutants can either save or destroy the human race during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Additionally, the *X-Men* film series have depicted superheroes that are “international and multicultural, and with greater individuality and maturity.”<sup>19</sup> Their identification among an American population struggles to be taken seriously and valued: Wolverine originates from Canada; Magneto is a German Jewish orphan (as mentioned); and Professor X and Mystique are British. In *X2: X-Men United* (2004), Nightcrawler is depicted as an intelligent and religious (albeit outcast) German mutant who plays a significant role in saving both mankind and mutants. Finally, Storm is a strong, fearless, and selfless African-American woman who takes on Professor X’s position of leadership when he is killed in *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2007).

In addition, other Marvel comic book characters have depicted transitional teenagers whose “regular success as community benefactor does not create the stable satisfaction they want in their private lives,” such as the





conflicted Peter Parker (Spider-Man). When Peter first discovers his new powers, he is distraught and lashes out at his foster parents and classmates. He even has a violent encounter with the school bully and takes advantage of his powers by making money in the wrestling circuit.

These typical adolescent traits depicting the genuine difficulties of troubled, abandoned teenagers are also given ample screen time in the *X-Men* film series: namely Rogue, Pyro, Iceman, Lady Deathstrike, Shadowcat (among other characters). “Often perceived as a menace to society, these teenaged superheroes consequently felt ambivalence toward society and their place in it.”<sup>20</sup>

On a similar theme, in *The Green Hornet* (2011), Chinese ‘sidekick’ Kato refuses to be anything but that by demanding equal treatment and involvement as the title character. “Kato is the stronger man in both mind and body ... who has the strategic and technological virility that the Green Hornet lacks.”<sup>21</sup> Kato proves his worth as a more resourceful superhero than the Green Hornet, which “enables him to accomplish seemingly supernatural feats during battle, and his intelligence—particularly in chemical, mechanical, and electrical engineering—makes him a strong supplement to the white American male’s (supposedly) winning charm and natural leadership.”<sup>22</sup>

Likewise, in Christopher Nolan’s *Batman* trilogy, Lucius Fox is an African-American who provides Batman with his sophisticated suit, gadgets, armory, and vehicles. Lucius practically saves Bruce Wayne’s life in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) as an older and weaker Batman must confront the menacing Bane. The latter originates from “a living hell” somewhere in a Far East prison who “raises an army of orphans ... and masterfully plots the city’s demise.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, Bane, an immigrant who imposes martial law in an attempt to punish the corrupt, draws sympathy in his cause. He is “a Robespierre of sorts, [who] spouts fiery speeches declaring a ‘people’s revolution’ while freeing the ‘oppressed’ from jails and orchestrating kangaroo courts sentencing class enemies to ‘exile or death.’”<sup>24</sup> The film makes a bold statement on the structure of American society as Bane critiques the ills of Western civilization.

Similarly, in *Iron-Man 2* (2010), Russian super-villain Ivan Vanko (Whiplash) is hardened by his time in prison and seeks revenge against the protagonist for having endured a great injustice inflicted by his father. “Whiplash is a formidable opponent ... even in prison, it’s clear Vanko has the upper hand. Stark has no idea where Vanko got the technology for his own electrified supersuit.”<sup>25</sup> Notwithstanding, Tony’s African-American military friend, Lt. Col. James “Rhodey” Rhodes, saves Tony not only from his self-destructive vanity but also from being decimated by Whiplash.

In a similar fashion, the *Blade* film trilogy depicts the first black Samurai superhero onscreen that fearlessly battles evil vampires (mostly white males, including

corrupt politicians). “Evil is white; it finds pleasure in greed and overconsumption ... Meanwhile, the black action heroes repeatedly called to vanquish these undead (or otherwise corrupted) whites are no longer the ‘buddies’ of the 1980s and early 1990s ... These black men now are heroes in their own right. They are cast as vengeful and lively characters, both likable and utterly fantastic, with back-stories and motivations all their own.”<sup>26</sup> This idea ties in with the *X-Men* and *Iron Man* film series where “corporately organized” white males (mostly politicians) seek knowledge and power by trying to engineer an improved race based on enhanced genetic material.



Furthermore, more recent comic book filmic adaptations have recognized the value of women and enabled them to gain a more substantial role onscreen. Aside from Storm and Rogue mentioned above, *X-Men* mutant Dr. Jean Grey is depicted as the most powerful of all mutants when she transforms into Phoenix. In *X2: X-Men United* (2004), she boldly sacrifices her life to save her fellow mutants from being killed.

Following this, in *The Fantastic Four* film series, the attractive Sue Storm becomes a superheroine whose powers ironically make her invisible. In fact, Invisible Girl not only becomes a very powerful female but her powers force men to focus on her intellect and skills. The two films “examine the subtle, unconscious influences of what could be called a pre-feminist awakening ... She also becomes a caricature of feminine ambiguity. Neither wholly professional nor domestic, Invisible Girl’s identity as both strong and invisible depicts the confusion with which many women in the early years of rising feminist consciousness were contending.”<sup>27</sup>

World renowned feminist author, Gloria Steinem, recently said, “I saw *The Dark Knight Rises* last night, and among other things, Catwoman is a feminist superhero with a story line and transformation of her own—plus class consciousness, a girl buddy, equal skills with the Batman equipment, and an apartment of her own in Old



Town. And she gets the guy.”<sup>28</sup> In Nolan’s final Batman film, both Catwoman and Miranda are depicted as strong, independent, intelligent women who manipulate the superheroes and dominate many aspects of society.

Correspondingly, in a previous film version of *Catwoman* (2004), the title character uses her sex appeal to bring justice to criminals. Actress Halle Berry said, “Being cast in the title role ... is about helping women come into their own and feel their sense of power, their own sexuality and use those things for their betterment.”<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, in *Iron Man 2* (2010) and *The Avengers* (2012), Natasha Romanoff (Russian superhero Black Widow) exhibits much of the same heroic superheroine behavior, but for a more altruistic cause. “Black Widow’s display of vulnerability shows the challenge of being a female superhero in a comic-book universe—and an empowered woman in the real world.”<sup>30</sup> In one scene, she single-handedly defeats a trio of gangsters before using her easily-willed charms to manipulate their leader into revealing important top-secret information. “Black Widow is more than a token female team mate in constant need of rescuing. She’s a domineering spy/assassin who makes equal use of her skill and physical beauty to manipulate her targets like man-clay.”<sup>31</sup> Later on, while cowering alone in the hull of a ship, she handles a violent encounter with the ferocious Hulk.

Correspondingly, in the *Iron Man* film series, Pepper Potts responsibly takes control of Stark Industries, saves Iron Man’s life from the foreboding Obadiah Stane, and later in the series warns him about clashing with Natasha. Pepper tells Tony, “She is from legal and she is potentially a very expensive sexual harassment lawsuit if you keep ogling her like that.” He responds, “Oh wow. Very, very impressive individual. She’s fluent in French, Italian, Russian, Latin. Who speaks Latin?”

In a similar fashion, *Watchmen* (2009) depicts the two Silk Spectre superheroines as strong, resilient females. “As tough women who fight crime on the streets of New York City, both Sally and her daughter [Laurie] are beneficiaries of *liberal feminism* ... all the while being a single mother she is a tough lady competing in a man’s world.”<sup>32</sup> Like her mother, Laurie is an unmarried woman who fights crime in the streets. However, she criticizes her mother’s use of sexuality to advance her career. Their wear costumes that are scantily clad although Laurie eventually opts for a more androgynous (even masculine) look (much like her father, the superhero Comedian) and she decides to carry a gun. In later scenes, Laurie proves her vigor by taking down thugs in a street alley who threaten to rape and beat her.

Finally, another minority often overlooked in comic book filmic adaptations is the physically disabled. “When we ‘google’ stereotypes of physical disability in film, we find that there are only approximately 8,000 entries ... [which] reinforces the idea that those with physical disabilities are invisible in American society ... portrayed as

lonely and struggling against incredible odds.”<sup>33</sup> *Daredevil* (2003) features a blind superhero named Matt Murdock. “His disability isn’t presented as limiting or psychologically crippling; his problem is his family background, not his sensorial difference. In fact, the protagonist’s diminished sight is key to the super-enhancement of his other senses.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Professor X in the *X-Men* film series is wheelchair-bound but can paradoxically move other people through telekinesis “on the side of right.”<sup>35</sup>

In contrast, the character of Hulk is depicted in several films as a mentally disabled individual unable to control his emotions. “*Hulk* is a warning about the folly of those who would toy with the secrets of life. It is about the anguish of having powers you did not seek and do not desire.”<sup>36</sup> In fact, many scenes depict the creature (who cannot speak tangibly even though his alter ego, Dr. Bruce Banner, is a genius scientist) as a scared, misunderstood child running for his life from a U.S. military that tries repeatedly to kill him.

Finally, *The Avengers* (2012) are led by the highly intelligent and fearless Nick Fury, an African-American who was originally Caucasian in the comic books. In 2014, *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* will feature Electro, an African-American electrical engineer who gains the ability to control electricity after being struck by lightning.

Overall, comic book filmic adaptations are a powerful medium that successfully raise awareness about many different races, ethnicities, subgroups, and cultures. Their depiction of minorities is reflected in outcast





superheroes shown to be a formidable (and often altruistic) force that strive to selflessly and fearlessly battle evil. The comic book filmic adaptation genre is a positive exemplification that translates across many audiences, while raising important sociopolitical issues that may have otherwise been put on the 'back burner' for discussion and reflection.



*The Incredible Hulk*

## Notes

- 1 "Hollywood Superheroes Losing The Fight For Diversity." Morning Edition Washington, D.C.: National Public Radio (NPR). August 9, 2011.
- 2 Minority groups are discussed as key terms and concepts, political viewpoints, and language in Simon Cottle (ed.), "Ethnic Minorities and the Media: Changing Cultural Boundaries." Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000.
- 3 M. Vetrie. (2004) "Using Film to Increase Literacy Skills," *English Journal*, 93(3), 39-45.
- 4 M. John Trushell. "American Dreams of Mutants: The X-Men-Pulp Fiction, Science Fiction, and Superheroes." *Journal of Popular Culture*; Aug 2004; Vol. 38, N°. 1, pg. 149.
- 5 Lawrence Baron. "X-Men as J Men: The Jewish Subtext of a Comic Book Movie." *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*. Fall 2003: Vol.22, N°. 1.
- 6 M. John Trushell. "American Dreams of Mutants: The X-Men-Pulp Fiction, Science Fiction, and Superheroes."
- 7 Kim Newman. "Sight and Sound." Sept. 2000: 26-28,3. British Film Institute.
- 8 Lawrence Baron. "X-Men as J Men: The Jewish Subtext of a Comic Book Movie."
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- 14 S. John Lawrence. "Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us about Ourselves and Our Society."
- 15 M. John Trushell. "American Dreams of Mutants: The X-Men-Pulp Fiction, Science Fiction, and Superheroes."
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BY ANNE CRÉMIEUX



Because they seek wide, mainstream audiences, Hollywood producers tend to steer away from any potential scandal that might lead to negative publicity and more importantly, boycotts, whether from official institutions or communities of people. The multiplication of local censorship bureaus in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century inspired Hollywood to set up the Motion Pictures Association of America's code of self-censorship also known as the Hays Code. First drafted by William H. Hays in 1924, it became fully effective in 1934. It was later replaced by the present rating system, which also contributes to smoothing out the content of Hollywood films, as the 2006 documentary *This Film Is Not Yet Rated* argues. In addition, the power pressure of lobbies, fan clubs, or religious groups, may still radically affect a film's box-office success.

During the application of the Hays Production Code (1934-1968), sensitive topics rarely reached the screens, no matter how "tastefully" dealt with. The Code defined with great care the topics, habits, costumes, language, and personality traits that were prohibited, and the tight frame within which they could turn up when deemed necessary to the plot. A film that did not meet the standards had no access to the vast distribution network the studios controlled. The Hays Code was in fact brought to an end by producers

Scandal in the Name of Truth

# Hollywood Movies and the Violation of Moral Propriety



Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf

who chose to disregard its rules and released films such as *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (Mike Nichols, 1966) or *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967), believing in their commercial potential. But such overt rebellion did not go unchecked and Jack Valenti, recently appointed head of the MPAA, set up the ratings system still in use.<sup>1</sup> Today, an NC-17 or X rating is usually highly detrimental to distribution and must be avoided at all costs. Major video distribution venues, such as Hollywood Video or Blockbuster, refuse to shelve NC-17 movies, in spite of the category having been created to differentiate adult films from pornography. Some examples of originally NC-17 films are *Basic Instinct* (1992), *Kids* (1995), *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *American Pie* (1999), *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), most films by Pedro Almodovar and Quentin Tarantino, or the *Saw* horror films (2004-2010). The main cinematic taboos in the past 20 years involve sexuality, violence, and language that are qualified as "strong", "extreme," "brutal," "graphic," "perverse," "aberrant," "explicit," "crude," or "erotic".<sup>2</sup> Because very few NC-17 or X-rated films may hope to be acquired by major distribution companies, most will accept edits to be granted an R rating.

Yet, at any given period, the incentive to deal with scandalous topics has been just as great, for if distribution is achieved, substantial box-office returns may follow. As a matter of fact, the R-rating promising "some adult material" is often considered desirable for action-oriented films that would suffer from the mild PG-13 rating. The most striking example of a condemning rating



being used for marketing purposes may be Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback Baadasssss Song* (1971), advertised as having been "rated X by an all-white jury." And while the pornographic scenes included in the film justified it, the poster implied that the moral police have political agendas that should be resisted. The X rating contributed to the scandalous nature of a highly political film that achieved spectacular box-office success.

As a medium, cinema is subjected to stricter rules than other arts. By accusing the censors of being white, and it is therefore implied, of not being capable of appreciating his film, Melvin Van Peebles was revisiting an old strategy: to defend the important truth of his story, a truth censors may not wish to be told.

Censoring the truth is commonly claimed to be anti-ethical when relative to history, morally wrong in the case of the Bible, and absurd when compared to literature. Examples are many. From *The Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915) to *Malcolm X* (Spike Lee, 1992), filmmakers have claimed historical truth often based on historical monographs, while religious films such as *Samson and Delilah* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1949) or *The Passion of the Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2004) were presented as perhaps shocking but true to the Scriptures. Filmic adaptations of racy plays such as *The Kiss* (Edison, 1895) or *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Elia Kazan, 1961) were met by outcries and censorship the original work did not generate. In the Hollywood tradition of playing around strict censorship codes, using the core American value of Truth as an argument is one of the best commercial strategies available.

### The Dangers of Cinema as a Medium

Popular lore tells that when in 1895, people saw a train arrive at the La Ciotat station, not in La Ciotat but projected on a screen in the Grand Café in Paris, they jumped out of their seats in fear of being hit. This dramatic reaction is well known, but unverified.<sup>1</sup> There are no direct testimonies of this sense of panic recorded in any archive. It has actually been established that the film was only shown in 1896, and not at the Grand Café, which adds another layer of uncertainty. Watching the film is not helpful either, as it seems rather un-spectacular. There is no sound and the train does not move directly towards the camera, which is placed at the front of the platform, not on the tracks. If the film scared 19<sup>th</sup> c. viewers, the effect seems gone today.

It is nonetheless remembered and endlessly told (and cleverly updated in *Hugo*) that the new technology felt so real to the highly impressionable audiences of 1895 that it was difficult for the brain to differentiate between film and reality.

More ancient forms of storytelling have similarly been criticized for their capacity to take over feeble minds. Cervantes ironically depicts the effects of "romances" in *Don Quixote* (1605): "In short, he so immersed himself in

those romances that he spent whole days and nights over his books; and thus with little sleeping and much reading, his brains dried up to such a degree that he lost the use of his reason."<sup>2</sup> Former President Thomas Jefferson was quite serious when he explained in a letter to Nathaniel Burwell (1818) that "A great obstacle to good education is the inordinate passion prevalent for novels, and the time lost in that reading which should be instructively employed. When this poison infects the mind, it destroys its tone and revolts it against wholesome reading. (...) The result is a bloated imagination, sickly judgment, and disgust towards all the real businesses of life."<sup>3</sup>

Thankfully, the invention of new media tends to raise the more ancient one to a higher art form. The effect on the mind, drying it up in Cervantes' ironic tale, poisoning it for Jefferson, sounds eerily similar to what was said at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century about cinema, or at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> about video games, accused of turning children into dimwits or worse, criminals.<sup>4</sup> Television has also been decried as a psychological and medical threat, with hundreds of scientific studies conducted since its first mass marketing in the 1950s.<sup>5</sup> In 1917, Professor Max Drennan, also owner of a theater in a working-class neighborhood in Ireland, drew the following comparison:

From the point of view of morals it might be profitable to draw a parallel between the use of Cinema and the use of Whiskey. Both are used as stimulus, or to produce a change in one's mental state. Just as good whiskey can be abused and become very evil, so there must be caution exercised with regards to the best of Cinemas. Either may be good in suitable quantities for suitable people, but, being strong stimulants, must be administered in dilution to the young and unstable. The danger attending any stimulant or sedative is that the system soon refuses to react to a small dose and that increasingly larger doses have to be exhibited. Neither alcohol nor cinema is necessary to the individual or the community, but owing to the large financial interests involved, suppression seems impossible, and control is attended with difficulty, although both possible and imperative.<sup>6</sup>

Drennan continues to stress the dangers of physical strain for the eyes and mind regardless of content, leading to "dissipation of attention" especially in the "less stable-minded," not unlike the effect "upon the mind caused by the abuse of reading." He then issues strong warnings against pictures featuring violence, sexual depravity, blasphemy, and advocates censorship by age, the promotion of alternative entertainment organized by the church, active social work, and greater investment in the education of the masses.



Drennan's views may be considered moderate and balanced for the times, for just as Jefferson continued his letter by admitting that "This mass of trash, however, is not without some distinction," early critics such as Drennan immediately understood that the true issue was to put the cinematograph to good use, rather than ban it altogether. This was precisely the message intended by the famous Paynes Funds Studies that resulted in the publication of Henry James Forman's *Our Movie Made Children* (1935), a report on statistical and psychological studies carried on between 1929 and 1933 about the effect of films on children. Cinema was a very popular medium, attended by "every mother's son and daughter," (Forman 12) that should be put to good use. And according to the report, it often was. The Motion Picture Research Council, commissioner of the Paynes Studies and part of the Motion Pictures Academy, listed "as representative of hundreds, possibly thousands, of commendable motion pictures that have been made, a few sample specimens as satisfying even exacting social standards," among which *Ben Hur* and *The Ten Commandments* (Forman 2). Studies also showed that motion pictures were wonderful tools of education. Emanating from the film industry itself, the Paynes Fund Studies logically foregrounded the possible positive uses of cinema, but in keeping with the concomitant Hays Code (implemented in 1934), also wished to steer away from controversial topics that would eventually harm the entire industry by resulting in widespread censorship.

The attitude of the Motion Picture Association of America and its code of self-censorship reflect a more general dilemma all producers face. Cinema is considered a dangerous medium, constantly testing the limits of propriety. When in 1903, Edwin S. Porter shot *The Great Train Robbery*, an elaborate depiction of a train robbery with special effects, hand-painted explosions on certain prints, and dozens of filming

locations, he included a close shot of Barnes, the leader of the outlaw band, taking aim and firing straight at the camera.

As in the case of the Lumière Brothers' *La Ciotat locomotive*, audiences were reported to jump from their seats in genuine fright. The evidence for this often-repeated tale is scarce, but the accompanying Edison film catalogue description did specify that "The resulting excitement is great. This section of the scene can be used either to begin the subject or to end it, as the operator may choose." Interestingly enough, the film does present a scene when the shot would seem to find its natural insertion when a passenger attempts to escape from the hold-up and is shot in the back.

The Edison catalogue, however, does not suggest such bold editing technique. Edison is leaving the dangerous task of startling the audience to the distributor, who may of course choose not to use the clip, initiating a widespread form of censorship in later years. Yet, theaters quickly learned to exploit, and audiences to enjoy, the pleasure of experiencing fear in a safe situation. Adding pleasure to excitement, there felt a dire need for some form of legitimacy, which established literature, historical renditions, and religious tales could easily lend the new medium.

### **Tell, Don't Show - The Shock of Literary Adaptations on Screen**

Films touching upon major societal taboos are commonly accused of being more potent than other forms of cultural expression, as they are received by large groups of lesser educated minds with a mix of disgust and pleasure that filmmakers ruthlessly exploit for profit, ignoring the possibly dangerous consequences in terms of undermining moral values and triggering copy-cat behavior. Although censorship is present for all forms of art, the response to adaptations from literary and theatrical sources suggests that the moving

image is more vulnerable: censorship falls upon film adaptations much harder than on the Broadway shows or publications they are based on.

Going back to the very beginning of cinema, Edison's 1896 *The John C. Rice-May Irwin Kiss* is a recreation in close-up of the kiss the two actors exchanged on stage in the 1895 Broadway play, *The Widow Jones*. The publicity for the play suggests unbecoming behavior, such as women smoking and drinking, and the widow Jones with two men at her feet while the third disapproves.

Painter John Sloan colorfully commented on Edison's film in an arts journal: "The spectacle of the prolonged pasturing on each other's lips was beastly enough in life size on the stage but magnified to gargantuan proportions and repeated three times over it is absolutely disgusting."

Although the original is criticized as "beastly," clearly it is the transfer on screen that is truly repulsing. The size of the screen and the possibility of repetition, which also means multiple reels reaching a wider audience than theater, and reaching it faster, are characteristic of the new medium. Whether in peep show galleries, where films are watched individually, or in the nickelodeon, cinema is a cheap form of entertainment available to the poor masses made of impressionable immigrants, women and children. It does not require the formal education that reading implies.

The Hays Code was particularly criticized when it came to toning down scripts adapted from novels and plays, most notably *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951). Elia Kazan willingly omitted any mention of homosexuality, to Tennessee Williams' dismay, but was furious to have to be equally artistically subtle in depicting Blanche's promiscuity and her rape by Stanley. Stanley also had to be punished by having Stella leave him, which does not happen in the play. But according to the code, rape must be punished.<sup>10</sup> The film's immense success, both with



audiences and critics, along with other “condemned” films that did very well (including Billy Wilder’s *Some Like it Hot*, 1959), contributed to the evolution and final demise of the code in favor of the present ratings system.

The film that is said to have inspired the 45-year-old president of the MPAA Jack Valenti to abandon the Code in favor of the present ratings system was also a screen adaptation of a play: *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. A meeting with Jack Warner resulted in the agreement that the word “screw” would be removed while “hump the hostess” was retained, leaving Valenti “uneasy about the meeting.”<sup>11</sup>

Valenti’s feeling of uneasiness did not come from whether the word should indeed be removed, but from “the odious smell of censorship,” leading him to devise the present ratings system. Although in effect, the rating system also leads to changes in the hope of obtaining the desired rating, according to Valenti, a major difference would be that “The movie industry would no longer “approve or disapprove” the content of a film, but (...) [give] advance cautionary warnings to parents (...) about the movie-going of their young children.”<sup>12</sup>

With the fall of the code and the cultural revolution of the 60s and 70s, the standards of language propriety on screen plummeted, and *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* would certainly receive an ordinary R rating today. Yet, the moving image continues to be regarded as more potent than the word, and indeed, has great potential to move people to question standards of proper conduct and morality across class and culture, worldwide. A marker of its times, *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005), based on the short story by Annie Proulx,<sup>13</sup> was rated R and triggered strong audience responses in a way the short story did not, for lack of widespread readership perhaps. Although it included very little violence and sexuality by the standards of straight cinema, one Internet

blogger reports “I saw *Brokeback Mountain* on opening weekend and after the first love scene half the cinema got up and left.”<sup>14</sup> Apparently, more than a few filmgoers were at first unaware of the twist to the genre convention this western would expose them to. The film poster shows the two men looking down, keeping their love a secret. The enigmatic tag line, “Love is a force of nature,” does not say much more.

Many religious groups condemned the film while sometimes assessing its qualities, perhaps to warn against its insidiousness. Harry Forbes of the Conference of Catholic Bishops concluded a detailed review by stating: “While the actions taken by Ennis and Jack cannot be endorsed, the universal themes of love and loss ring true.”<sup>15</sup> By managing to depict a love story that rang “true,” Ang Lee certainly sent Annie Proulx’s message to the masses and a compelling star-crossed lovers’ story found the perfect medium, one that Jean-Luc Godard called “truth 24 times per second.”<sup>16</sup>

### Interpreting Historical Truths

Although audiences may well be aware that images are no less manipulative than words or any form of human expression, motion pictures do have the potential to easily be perceived as “real” and “truthful,” including when presenting a recreation of past events that obviously implies interpretation and transformation.

When *The Birth of a Nation* was released in 1915 and played to full houses of enthralled white<sup>17</sup> spectators, President Woodrow Wilson, having seen it at a White House screening, is reported to have said “It is like writing history with lightning, and my only regret is that it is all so terribly true.”<sup>18</sup> Blacks picketed the film outside the Liberty Theater in Times Square, to no avail, while the NAACP wrote Woodrow Wilson to warn him against the heroic depiction of the birth of the Ku Klux Klan

fighting against black-faced villains. Although the White House wrote back denying the President’s support, *Birth of a Nation* enacted widely accepted theses that Woodrow Wilson had himself suggested in his book *Division and Reunion 1829-1889* (1898), according to which the Black vote represented a menace for the White race, and Black citizens had no positive role to play in Reconstruction. Griffith’s historical legitimacy was also grounded on the fact that his film was the adaptation of *The Clansman* (1905), a bestselling novel in which author Thomas Dixon presents most of his fictional recounting of the Civil War as historical fact.

Griffith himself was greatly shocked by the accusations and seems to have been genuinely unaware of the film’s racist overtones, producing a form of apology with the film *Intolerance* (1919). Charles Affron’s 2001 biography of Lillian Gish quotes her quoting Griffith against accusations of racism: “To say that is like saying I am against children, as they were our children, whom we loved and cared for all of our lives.”<sup>19</sup> Though perhaps not Griffith’s exact words, his paternalistic stance illustrates the flexibility of historical truth.

Many years later, a very different film prominently featured a Ku Klux Klan scene: Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X* shows the attack of Malcolm Little’s boyhood home in Omaha, Nebraska in the 1920s by a posse of Klansmen on horseback breaking windows and riding away in the moonlight. As noted by Nell Irvin Painter, the likeliness of such a scene is doubtful: “Once more in film, or so it appeared, D. W. Griffith’s images cancel out the unlikelihood of twentieth-century, midwestern, urban Klansmen making their rounds by horse.”<sup>20</sup> Naturally, the narrative is one of terror rather than heroism, but the iconography does indeed hark back to Southern visual tropes that are not true to the time and place in which the scene is set.





Admittedly when in 1992, Spike Lee directed the film he was “born to make,”<sup>21</sup> dedicating a big-budget biopic to a proponent of violent self-defense was controversial. Audiences were still digesting the shock of *Jungle Fever* (1990) and *Do the Right Thing* (1989), the gentle notes of *Mo’ Better Blues* (1991) having done little to tone down the image of “America’s angriest director.”<sup>22</sup> Although close to Alex Haley’s bestselling biography of Malcolm X, and to the script originally drafted by James Baldwin, Spike Lee readily agrees that he took some liberties: “*Malcolm X* is my artistic vision. The film is my interpretation of the man.”<sup>23</sup> In *Malcolm X*, Spike Lee mixes documentary black and white images with color fiction, interspersed with black and white documentary-like fiction featuring Denzel Washington as Malcolm X, re-enacting scenes that may or may not be true to history.<sup>24</sup> Although the film hardly pleased historians, it did return a profit, in spite of Warner Bros’ founded fears that white audiences would not turn up in great numbers. In fact, Spike Lee’s “interpretation of the man” touched predominantly black audiences. Many historical films do not fare so well across cultures, as illustrated by the French ban of Kubrick’s *Paths of Glory* (1957, released in France in 1975) or the negative reaction in Italy to Spike Lee’s *Miracle at St. Anna* (2008), two American films about how Europeans fought their wars. Clearly, different people hold different truths, for both films are

said to be based on “true” stories (somewhat loosely so). More often than not, films that claim historical truth are met by controversy. All the more so if that “historical truth” is taken from the Bible.

### The Bible as the Ultimate Source of Scandalous Images

As artists of the past centuries well knew, the Old and New Testament withhold great treasures in terms of gruesomeness, improper behavior, political intrigue, racial mixing, and of course, religious matters, all major topics of controversy in American cinema. More importantly, scenes picked directly from the Holy Scriptures present an excellent defense strategy when subject to censorship since after all, they are evoked in church and serve as morality tales.

Going back to the beginnings of cinema, religious films were produced by the dozen. A director like Cecil B. DeMille built his reputation partly on Biblical epics, most notably with *The Ten Commandments* (1923, see praise by Forman above, and remade in 1956), followed by the more controversial *The King of Kings* (1927). DeMille’s religious films share many characteristics with his ancient world epics, notably *The Sign of the Cross* (1932), *Cleopatra* (1934), *The Crusades* (1935), and *Samson and Delilah* (1949), all taking place in a lavishly decadent setting. The trailer of *Samson and Delilah* invited its audience to “see as he saw the orgies of barbaric pagans that groused his vengeful fury,” telling how “when Samson was ensnared by the seductive beauty of Delilah, his lust became a trap that led to his downfall and capture.” The destruction of the Temple of Dagon is presented as “the most spectacular scene of destruction ever seen.” DeMille’s instructions to his staff are in the same tone: “We’ll sell it as a story of faith, a story of the power of prayer. That’s for the censors and the women’s organizations. For the public, it’s the hottest love story of all time.”<sup>25</sup>

*The Sign of the Cross*, produced just before the Hays Code was implemented, originally featured particularly grisly scenes of gladiator fights killing each other with shining blades, spears, pitchforks, and knuckle forks, and being in turn killed by elephants, tigers, buffalos and bears. Black-faced dwarves are seen fighting Neolithic-clad women. Half-naked women are most sadistically given as bait to alligators and gorillas.

More focused on the upcoming fall of Rome than on Christianity, the thin plot involves Emperor Nero burning Rome and blaming it on the Christians, while his Commander in chief falls in love with one of them. Setting the story back in ancient times allows for a level of violence and sex not generally accepted in present-time productions, even in the pre-Code era of 1932. Most of these scenes of violence, as well as scenes of homosexuality and lesbianism, were cut out for the 1938 and 1944 re-release, and reinstated in the 1993 video.

*The Sign of the Cross*, along with other films such as *Scarface* (1932) or *Goldiggers* (1933) produced at the heart of the Great Depression, are said to have largely contributed to the strict implementation of the Hays Production Code. The Bible, however, remained a way to work around the Code. In 1951, *David and Bathsheba* was reviewed by *Time* magazine as “a censor-proof tale of a strong man’s weakness for a beautiful woman.”<sup>26</sup> By featuring an adulterous murderer hailed as hero and king by his people, *David and Bathsheba* broke more than a few fundamental Code rules, but as director Henry King explained: “they had to agree with us that they could not change the Bible to fit the Code.”<sup>27</sup>

Beyond the depiction of sex and violence, religious films have triggered some of the greatest controversies of American cinema. Religious controversy is at the core of perhaps the most important legal decision concerning American film censorship. When Martin Burstyn



attempted distribution in New York City of Roberto Rossellini's *The Miracle* (*Amore*—1948), he was accused of blasphemy and the Paris Theater screening the film was picketed. *The Miracle* tells the story of a dim-witted virgin peasant woman who gives birth after spending one night with a man she believes was St. Joseph. The 1952 *Burstyn v. Wilson* Supreme Court Decision forced the city of New York to remove its law concerning films considered "sacrilegious," officially extending first amendment freedom of speech rights to motion pictures.

This new legal situation did not prevent the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* (Norman Jewison, 1973), the British Bible parody *Life of Brian* (Monty Python, 1979), or the highly intellectual *The Last Temptation of Christ* (Martin Scorsese, 1988) from being severely criticized by Christian churches for taking liberties with the Scriptures. *Jesus Christ Superstar* was also accused of anti-Semitism, much like DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927) and Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). With censorship rendered illegal, religious controversy became even more profitable.

DeMille's 1927 *The King of Kings* was accused by Jewish organizations of anti-Semitism for its stereotyping of the High Priests, much like Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* in 2004. Concern about reception in other parts of the world was particularly acute in 1927, when pogroms were still a reality in Eastern Europe and Russia. The specific concern of the anti-defamation associations was

the same for the two films: wrongfully depicting the High Priest Caiaphas and the Jewish people as being responsible for the killing of Christ. In contrast to 1927, protest against Mel Gibson's production was entirely ineffectual in terms of box-office results, inspiring Mel Gibson to strongly stand behind his artistic choices. The most decried scene involves Caiaphas saying "His blood is on [us] and our children," taken from Matthew (27:23-25) where it is instead attributed to "the people." The distinction could be important since the phrase is usually interpreted as a curse befalling the Jews. If it was said by "the people," it can be interpreted as befalling all men, who in the assembly happened to be Jews. But by putting the words in Caiaphas' mouth, Gibson has the High Priest plead guilty to the age-old accusation of the Jewish authorities having killed Christ. More generally, as was also the case in *The King of Kings*, the scene clearly states that not only were the High Priests responsible for the death of Christ, but they were aware of it.

Responding to various pressures, Gibson chose to keep the phrase but removed the subtitles (the film is entirely in Aramaic and Latin with subtitles), obscuring it for the average filmgoer. He explains: "It's one little passage, and I believe it, but I don't and never have believed it refers to Jews, and implicates them in any sort of curse. (...) But I finally had to admit that one of the reasons I felt strongly about keeping it, aside from the fact it's true, is that I didn't want to let someone else dictate what could or couldn't be said."<sup>28</sup> Asked whether it may upset Jews, Mel Gibson admits: "It may. It's not meant to. I think it's meant to just tell the truth."<sup>29</sup> Once more, truth is invoked to justify standing up to censorship, and it would indeed be hard to argue that the issue is not present in the text itself. Unlike the man-made truths found in historical accounts and literature, the truthfulness of the Bible presents the

advantage of never being debated by filmmakers and their critics, for it would imply debating the very source of the Holy Scriptures.

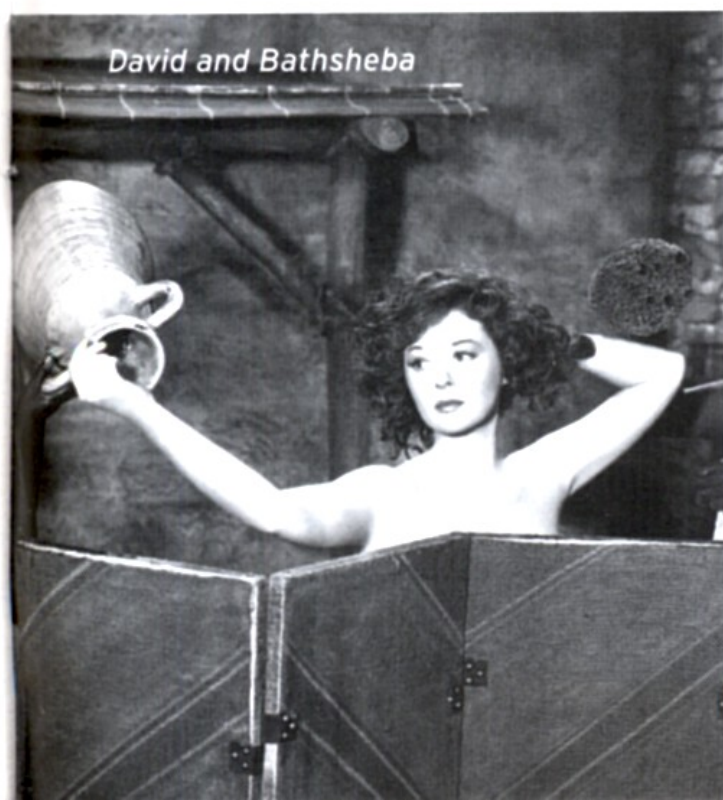
*The Passion of the Christ* ranks amongst the highest grossing films of all time and is possibly the highest grossing independent film, proving that the Bible can still be a profitable source of inspiration for American cinema.

One film that meant to shock but was mostly received in good faith, possibly because its makers were themselves Catholics having good fun, is Kevin Smith's turn of the century, mythological comedy *Dogma*. Frat Pack friends Matt Damon and Ben Affleck star as sex-craved Angels with a shoddy sense of right and wrong. They come up against unaware Prophets Jay and Silent Bob (Jason Mewes and Kevin Smith), who utter and nod at the F-Word a record amount of times (including 7 times to God herself) while constantly begging for sex and advocating masturbation. In short, *Dogma* breaks every rule established by years of institutional censorship.

A quick introductory disclaimer states that "To insist that any of what follows is incendiary or inflammatory is to miss our intention and pass undue judgment; and passing judgment is reserved for God and God alone." *Dogma* plays with the very idea of censorship and controversy. An early scene shows a Cardinal giving a press conference to launch his "Catholicism Wow!" campaign and its new "Buddy Christ" figure.

This scene is the first of many playful stabs at the former Hays Code and its specific statement that members of the clergy should not be ridiculed or religion disrespected. The Catholic Church is further made fun of as dealing out indulgences and shamelessly proselytizing. It is compared to the tobacco industry for preying on potential addicts, while the Cardinal admits to having made certain mistakes concerning slavery and the holocaust.

Trendy, controversial topics such as abortion and homosexuality



David and Bathsheba

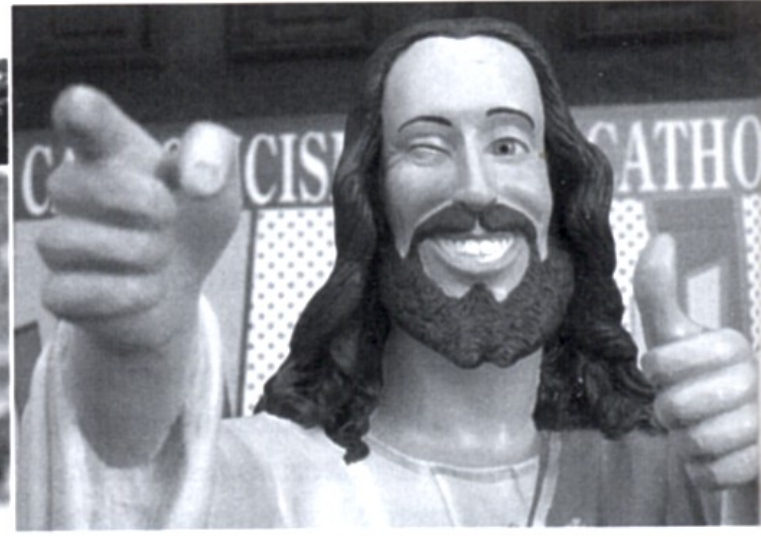




*The Last Temptation of Christ*



*The Passion of the Christ*



*Dogma*

are mentioned in passing, with the descendant of Christ working at an abortion clinic or Bartleby and Loki (Ben Affleck and Matt Damon) being mistaken for a gay couple. Jay refers to the Cardinal as “the guy in the dress.”

*Dogma* also plays with other classic conventions of censorship, with a particularly long kiss that ends in the Angel of Death shooting an adulterous husband in the head. A shocking revelation of frontal nudity enables Angel Metatron to prove his Angelic status to the less than holy Last Scion.

More than a few blasphemous statements are made in passing, including that the Virgin was not a virgin, that Jesus Christ was very reluctant to play his role, that there was more than one Adam, that there was a 13<sup>th</sup> Apostle named Rufus, played by Chris Rock, who refers to “J.C.” as a “nigga” who “owes him 12 bucks,” or that most humans who hear God are talking to themselves. The Bible itself is weighed against *Hustler* for its popularity. It is accused of being racist by the 13<sup>th</sup> Apostle, left out because he was black, and of being sexist by the post-feminist muse-turned-stripper who inspired the Gospels. The Golden Calf episode is ridiculed when the Angel of Death slaughters a room of businessmen as idolaters for franchising “Mooby the Golden Calf” and breaking the first commandment. As for God him or her or itself, they regularly travel to earth to gamble or indulge in other mundane activities, adopting various shapes, including Alanis Morissette who gives Jay a

hard-on when she kisses him. As a whole, *Dogma* clearly insinuates that God is not quite infallible, though s/he does exist and can resurrect the last Scion, while at the same time impregnating her with the Scion next in line.

During the resurrection scene, the angel Metatron quotes from *The Karate Kid* and *The Million Dollar Man*, as if pop culture were part of the Scriptures, otherwise conflated with other mythologies, mostly Norse with Loki’s prominent role as the God of mischief. The rather uncalled for apparition of Golgotha, “the shit demon,” adds a scatological spin to an already full plate.

Perhaps because its humorous tone made it easier not to take offense, *Dogma* did not create any major controversy, prompting only a few people in Eatontown, New Jersey, to picket its opening, joined incognito by Kevin Smith, eager to criticize his own movie once he found out about the protest. Nor did the film gross as much as expected, which as the success of *The Passion of the Christ* showed, is not imputable to its topic, but more likely to the fact that every character but Silent Bob, ironically played by Kevin Smith, simply talks too much. Yet this verbose, somewhat nerdy film has built a strong cult following amongst role-players and other Christian mythology aficionados.

The reception of the film may be contrasted with Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ*, which was violently countered, in the US and abroad. In France, extremists attacked the Espace Saint Michel

theater in Paris, injuring 13 people. The film was censored in many countries for years and is still banned in the Philippines and Singapore. Entirely serious in tone, *The Last Temptation of Christ* also takes liberties with the Gospels by having Christ hallucinate in pain on the cross, and envision himself marrying Mary Magdalene and leading a normal life, instead of dying for all mankind.

It could be said, then, seeing the astounding success of the gory *Passion of the Christ* and its long scenes of martyrdom verging on the sadistic, that Christian audiences sensitive to religious issues are indeed first and foremost preoccupied with upholding the Biblical “truth” rather than, for example, reconciliation with the Israelites. Just as DeMille could count on his censors being Bible worshippers to attract post-1929 audiences back into the theaters with sensational images of sex and violence, Mel Gibson’s gory film was received with great religious fervor, having specifically been marketed to Christian audiences. Invitations to premieres were sent to prominent religious figures and TV-evangelists, relaying positive reviews to their congregations and selling blocks of advanced tickets.<sup>10</sup> The Pope himself received a copy for his private viewing and was reported to have liked it, and uttered only one phrase he wished to share through Msgr. Dziwisz, who saw the film with him: “It is as it was.” The Pope made no other comment, precisely because the film was a source of controversy, and made no mention of other reservations he might have concerning



its violence, for example.<sup>11</sup> But to the production and audiences around the world, what mattered was that the Pope stood behind the film, pronouncing its veracity. The Pope's statement asserts the historic validity of the Gospels, showing how indeed, just as invoking pre-established literary sources or factual knowledge, sacred texts remain an efficient strategy to counter censorship while achieving box-office success—"It is as it was."

TITLE	DATE	BUDGET	GROSS <sup>28</sup>
<i>The Ten Commandments</i>	1923	\$1.5M	\$4.2M
<i>The King of Kings</i>	1927	\$1.3M	\$2.6M
<i>The Sign of the Cross</i>	1932	\$696,000	\$2.8M
<i>The Crusades</i>	1933	\$1.375M	\$1.4M
<i>Cleopatra</i>	1934	\$840,000	\$2M
<i>Samson and Delilah</i>	1949	\$3M	\$12M
<i>David and Bathsheba</i>	1951	\$2.1M	\$6.5M
<i>The Ten Commandments</i>	1956	\$13.5M	\$80M
<i>Jesus Christ Superstar</i>	1973	\$4M	\$13.2M
<i>Life of Brian</i>	1979	\$4M	\$20M
<i>The Last Temptation of Christ</i>	1988	\$7M	\$8.4M
<i>Dogma</i>	1999	\$10M	>\$31M; \$13M world
<i>The Passion of the Christ</i>	2004	\$30M	>\$370M; \$610M world

## Notes

- There are currently 5 ratings: G for General audience, PG for Parental Guidance suggested, PG-13 for Parental Guidance under 13, R for Restricted - children under 17 must be accompanied by a parent or guardian, NC-17 for No Children 17 and under admitted.
- All quoted terms are listed by *The Classification and Rating Administration* on [www.filmratings.com](http://www.filmratings.com), in relation to all three categories - sexuality, violence, and language ("erotic sexuality" included). Drug use, gore, horror, and torture are also common criteria for receiving NC-17 and R ratings.
- The theory has been questioned notably by Martin Loiperdinger in "Lumiere's Arrival of the Train: Cinema's Founding Myth," *The Moving Image*: Vol 4, N° 1 (Spring 2004) 89-118.
- Miguel Cervantes, *Don Quixote*. Translated by Walter Starkie (New York: Signet Classic, 2001) 58.
- The Thomas Jefferson Papers, 1606-1827*, Library of Congress, image 749, [www.memory.loc.gov](http://www.memory.loc.gov)
- The shooters at Columbine, Colorado, on April 20th, 1999, were said to have been fascinated by games such as *Doom*, and to have created a level following the architecture of their high school. Newspaper accounts after the 2011 Norway shooting show the video game theory is still alive, Anders Behring Breivik having been an occasional *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* and *World of Warcraft* online player (both multiplayer online game). It was later reported he apparently pretended he was addicted to games so his family would not question the time he spent preparing for the attack.
- Television is commonly accused of being a correlating factor in obesity, ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), and other addictive behaviors, along with strong addiction to TV itself and obsession with specific TV shows.
- In "The Cinema and its Dangers by Professor Max Drennan," *The Irish Monthly*, Vol 45, No 524 (Feb. 1917) 75.
- John Sloan, *The Chap Book* (15 July 1896), as reported by Linda Williams in *Screening Sex*, Duke University Press Book (2008).
- For Kazan's feelings about the final edits, see Murray Schumach, *The Face on the Cutting Room Floor* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974: 78)
- Jack Valenti, "How It All Began," Motion Picture Association of America, [www.mpa.org](http://www.mpa.org)
- Ibid.
- Brokeback Mountain* was first published in *The New Yorker* (October 13, 1997) 74, and included in *Close Range: Wyoming Stories* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1999).
- [www.zone.aintitcool.com](http://www.zone.aintitcool.com)
- Reported in *Christianity Today* (08/12/2005), [www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com)
- This expression attributed to Godard is actually uttered by Michel Subor, playing Bruno Forestier in *Le petit Soldat* (1963): "La photographie, c'est la vérité, et le cinéma, c'est vingt-quatre fois la vérité par seconde."
- Theaters were segregated in the South and the first-run ticket entry was exceptionally high, 2 dollars as opposed to the usual 5 to 10 cents.
- Quoted by Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) 52.
- Charles Affron, *Lillian Gish: Her Legend, Her Life* (New York: Scribner, 2001) 88.
- Nell Irvin Painter, "Malcolm X across the Genres," *American Historical Review* 98, N° 2 (April 1994) 396.
- Spike Lee, *By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations of the Making of Malcolm X* (New York: Hyperion, 1992) 2.
- As one example only, see Tom Hibbert, "The Angriest Black Man in America," *Empire* 46 (April 1993).
- Spike Lee, *By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations of the Making of Malcolm X* (New York: Hyperion, 1992) xiv.
- For a thorough examination of Spike Lee's interpretation of the life of Malcolm X, see Nell Irvin Painter, "Malcolm X across the Genres," *American Historical Review* 98, N° 2 (April 1994) 396-404.
- Quoted by Kendall R. Phillips in *Controversial Cinema: the Films that Outraged America* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008) 137, from Phil Koury, *Yes, Mr. DeMille* (New York: G.P. Putman & Sons, 1959) 206.
- Ibid. 137, from "David and Bathsheba," *Time* (August 20, 1951) 86
- Ibid. from Gerald Forshey, *American Religious and Biblical Spectaculars* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992) 66.
- Figures are not adjusted for inflation. Budgets and Gross for pre-1936 DeMille films are taken from David Pierce, "Costs and Grosses for the Early Films of Cecil B. DeMille," in *L'Eredita DeMille, Pordenone: Edizione Biblioteca dell'immagine*, 1991, pp. 308-317. Other figures were collected from various sources, including IMDb and Wikipedia, and all may be subject to errors and approximations.
- Terry Lawson for the "Mel Gibson and Other 'Passion' Filmmakers say the Movie was Guided by Faith," *Detroit Free Press* (Feb. 17, 2004).
- Richard Corliss, "The Passion of Mel Gibson," *Time* (19/01/2003), reporting Bill O'Reilly's interview of Mel Gibson for Fox News, [www.time.com](http://www.time.com)
- For a detailed study of the marketing of religious films, including DeMille's *The King of Kings* and *The Sign of the Cross*, see Peter A. Maresco, "Mel Gibson's The Passion Of The Christ: Market Segmentation, Mass Marketing and Promotion, and the Internet," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* (Vol 8: Fall 2004), [www.artsandscience.usask.ca](http://www.artsandscience.usask.ca)
- Peggy Noonan, "'It Is As It Was' Mel Gibson's 'The Passion' gets a thumbs-up from the pope," *Wall Street Journal* (17/12/2003), [online.wsj.com](http://online.wsj.com)





Shuddh Desi Romance

# Impurely Bollywood

BY AJAY GEHLAWAT

**M**aneesh Sharma's recent film, *Shuddh Desi Romance* (*Pure Indian Romance*, hereafter *SDR*, 2013), begins with a montage of hands—those of heterosexual Indian couples who either hold or reach out to hold one another's in public. This beginning itself marks a shift in the changing mores of India in the twenty-first century, where acts previously considered "private" are now increasingly on public display. This film, Sharma's third, following *Band Baaja Baaraat* (hereafter *BBB*, 2010) and *Ladies vs. Ricky Bahl* (hereafter *Ladies*, 2011), is again concerned with the relationships of young people in contemporary, urban India, following as it does the back-and-forth romantic relationships of Raghu (Sushant Singh Rajput) with two women, Gayatri (Parineeti Chopra) and Tara (Vaani Kapoor), who enter and exit his life almost as haphazardly as his feelings for them develop (and dissipate). Raghu first meets Gayatri en route to his arranged wedding with Tara and, following a brief exchange of kisses and cigarettes with Gayatri on the bus, he arrives at his wedding

only to flee, leaving Tara alone at the altar with the garland she was to place around his neck. Following this foiled wedding, Raghu pursues a relationship with Gayatri which also leads to a planned wedding, only this time Gayatri flees at the last minute, leaving Raghu stranded. Raghu subsequently reencounters Tara (at another wedding) and, just as they begin to grow attracted to one another and decide to finally wed, Gayatri reappears, again confusing Raghu who ultimately (again) leaves Tara for Gayatri.

In this back-and-forth to and from the wedding altar, the trope of the Indian (Hindu) wedding is even further hollowed out than it was in Sharma's first film, *BBB*, in which the two leads (Ranveer Singh and Anushka Sharma) play young wedding planners who fall in and out of love with each other even as they orchestrate and participate in the increasingly lavish arranged weddings of other young Indian couples. While *BBB* effectively illuminated the business transactions underlying these arranged marriages, *SDR* goes one step further, as the young people here, rather than ultimately coming together at the finale (as they do in *BBB*), increasingly question the

very institution of marriage. In many ways, *SDR* can be said to do the same with regard to the conventions of popular Hindi cinema, aka Bollywood, creating in the process a new form of popular Indian cinema which, as with the relationships in the film, challenges the very notion of what Bollywood entails in the twenty-first century. In this review, I would like to map out the various formal and thematic ways in which *SDR* challenges and reformulates earlier conventions associated with Bollywood and carves out a new niche for itself that simultaneously reflects the rapid changes taking place in contemporary urban India.

To begin this discussion, I would like to consider the role of one of the most well-known generic elements of the Bollywood film, the song and dance sequence, in *SDR*. There is by now a rather large body of work not only on Bollywood cinema but on this element in particular, with several theories proposed regarding both its composition and relation to the larger narrative. A particularly dominant interpretation has been to see the song sequence as substituting for explicit displays of affection or, alternatively, as providing a lead up to coital relations which are



themselves elided.<sup>1</sup> Most recently, even as onscreen representations of sexuality in Bollywood films have increased (and grown increasingly flagrant in terms of both what is depicted and how), the role of the song sequence has essentially remained the same, with, for instance, highly sexualized song sequences setting up the implied coital relations of hero and heroine which, in turn, remain largely elided. A particularly good recent example of this approach can be seen in *Kambakkht Ishq* (*Damn Love*, 2009), in which the song sequence, “Bebo,” builds up to the actual sexual encounter between the film’s leads (Kareena Kapoor and Akshay Kumar) and culminates with the couple (presumably naked and having sex) in bed, as both camera and music fade out. Following a cut, we see Kapoor the next morning, now bereft of both her co-star and the previous night’s song, waking up suddenly and realizing what has transpired as she peers beneath the bed sheet with a look of chagrin. Following this is the rather normative period of estrangement between the members of the heterosexual couple who slowly come to terms with what they have done (engaged in premarital sex), ultimately reunite and (presumably) marry. Even Sharma’s more recent *BBB* features such a sequence of events, with the young wedding planners engaging in premarital sex, followed by the now generically coded “morning after” scene, featuring a somber hero, in this case, departing silently to come to terms with what has transpired.

In *SDR*, none of this happens. There is no song building up to the (elided) sex; instead, Gayatri and Raghu have sex and, the morning after, we get the song, an upbeat number initiated, via playback, by Gayatri who whistles and smiles as she comes out of the shower, changing her clothes as she sings to Raghu, still in bed and also smiling. She then proceeds to pose the song’s title question—*Tere mere beech mein kya hai?* (What is there between you

and me?)—which Raghu repeats and Gayatri answers with “Chaddhar” (bed sheet). They continue singing and cavorting around the apartment while engaging in quotidian activities such as hanging up wet laundry, doing the dishes and even shaving—he his beard, she her legs. All of this is quite new for Bollywood, particularly in relation to even the most recent picturizations of such (morning after) moments. Gone is the silent, shameful coming to terms by the heroine with the events of the night before; instead we have a whistling, singing Gayatri who proclaims, *Literally silly hai meri love life* (Literally silly is my love life) and, with these words, literally rewrites the entire history of premarital sexual encounters and, importantly, the way the Indian heroine comes to terms with such moments in Bollywood.

In a similar break from past tradition, *SDR* is more about the two female characters than the (slightly clueless) male figure whom the women, rather than pining over, turn to almost as a way of alleviating boredom or, indeed, out of sexual attraction. Rather than engaging in either the kind of self-abnegating devotional love or highly romanticized and drawn out courtship that previously predominated in Bollywood love stories, we have a young woman who is upfront both in and about her desires without being coded as a vamp. Meanwhile, in another significant shift, the male character becomes sexually involved with two women without any ensuing tragedy or melodramatic fireworks occurring. Instead, Raghu moves from one woman to the other almost casually and, significantly, without much guilt involved, in part perhaps because both women, rather than being naive or deceived, know precisely what is going on and do not seem particularly perturbed by his “two-timing.” Even as recently as Sharma’s previous *Ladies* (2011), when the male character (Ricky Bahl) first engages in a sexually charged encounter with

one of the eponymous ladies (played by Parineeti Chopra), it is he who refuses to ‘go all the way’, resisting Chopra’s character’s drunken sexual overtures and thus, as she subsequently acknowledges, upholds both his and her *izzat*, or honor. In *SDR*, Raghu ‘hooks up’ with both women (via respective songs) and no *izzat* issue arises, as the very concept seems to have become irrelevant to all parties involved.

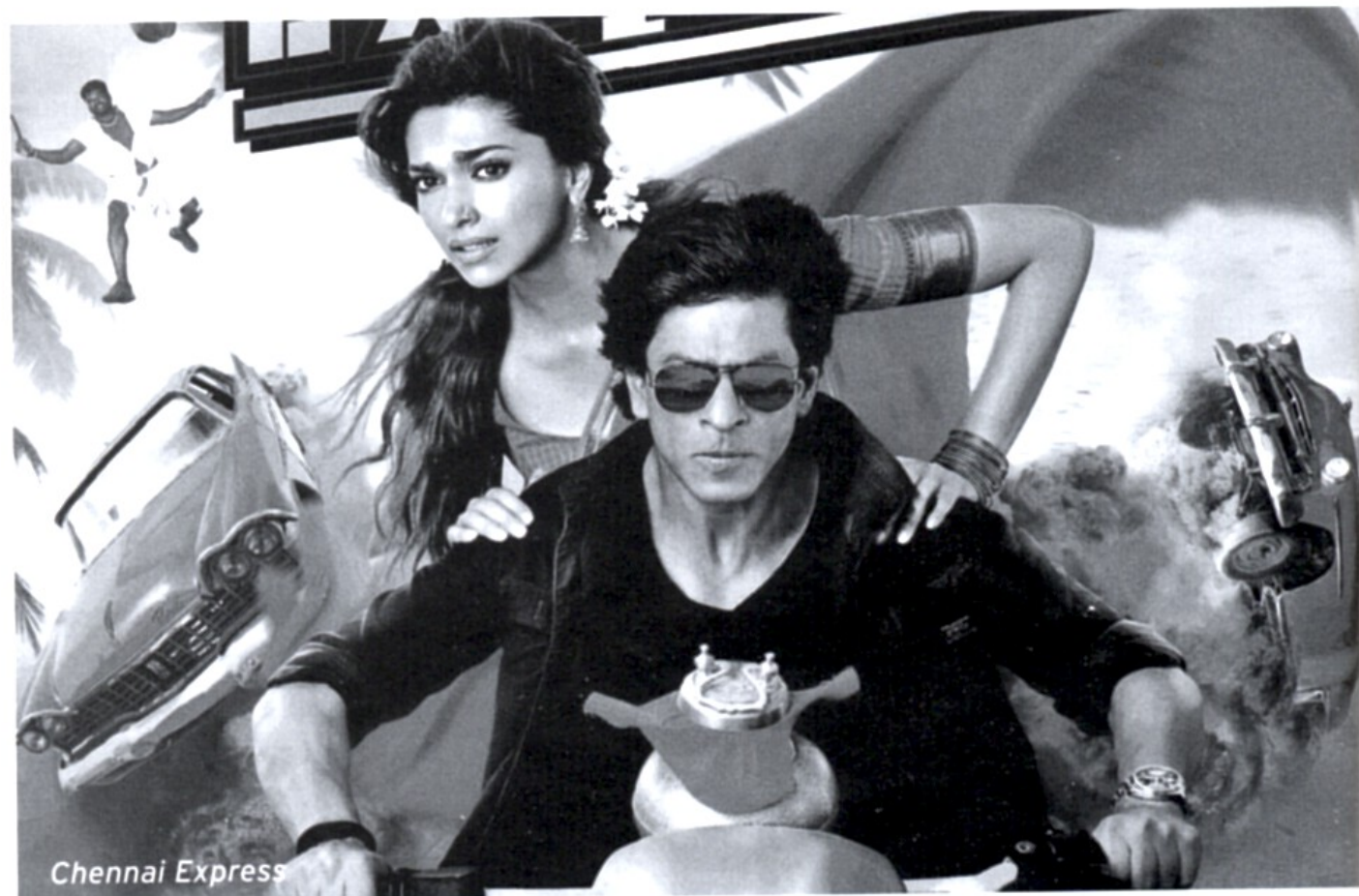
A parallel deviation from earlier norms can be seen in both women’s behavior. Whereas previously, engaging in activities such as smoking, drinking or having premarital sex coded a woman as the aforementioned ‘vamp’ figure, in *SDR* both Gayatri and Tara take up such activities while avoiding the type of punishment that was formerly meted out to such a transgressive figure, e.g., death. Related to this in some ways is the near or total lack of any parental/ authority figures in *SDR* or, conversely, any such potential figures are deprived of their traditional power. Rishi Kapoor’s older ‘Tauji’ character, rather than leveling interdictions, seems to become more of an enabler, providing only the mildest of chastisement and not taking action when any of the younger characters fail to heed his advice, for instance, regarding the importance of marriage. The older male relative of Tara, the ubiquitous mustachioed ‘Uncle’ figure, is similarly prevented from engaging in retribution against Raghu for absconding from his wedding and, further, is stopped from doing so by none other than Tara whose intervention comes at precisely the moment where, in past films, the young woman’s *izzat* would be avenged, usually by engaging in extreme forms of violence against the (dishonorable) man. Here, Tara instead calmly yet forcefully tells her uncle to leave Raghu alone, explaining that this is her affair, not his, and her uncle complies. Finally, even the most venerable of all moral authority figures in Hindi film, the Hindu pandit, remains silent, if somewhat



bug-eyed, while seated in the back seat of Raghu's car (en route to preside over yet another arranged wedding), listening to Raghu and Gayatri argue about their modern day relationship and all its ensuing modern dilemmas.

In this way, even if one compares *SDR* to the contemporary hit, *Chennai Express* (2013), one immediately sees just how radical such an absence (of parental/authority figures) is, as the latter film, despite being released the same year as *SDR*, still hews to the generic patriarchal story structure in which the male lead (played by Bollywood superstar Shah Rukh Khan) protects and fights for the female lead (Deepika Padukone) and, furthermore, must win her father's approval in order to marry her, even as Padukone's character seems emotionally moved by such an endeavor. On the other hand, neither woman in *SDR* seems invested in, nor appears to care for, such theatrics, signaling in the process a rather substantial paradigm shift in terms of Bollywood conventions, particularly as they apply to female characters and questions of conjugality.

In a related shift, *SDR* does not feature any big-name stars, instead employing lesser known, up and coming actors. In this way, as with all the other departures from the normative Bollywood mode delineated above, *SDR* comes closer to what Sangita Gopal has labeled the *bat-ke* (offbeat) film, even as, in other ways, it retains more of the Bollywood style.<sup>2</sup> Such a reconfiguration, that is, a conflation of these two disparate styles (*bat-ke* and Bollywood), is also innovative, providing a new embodiment of yet another recent phenomenon in Indian cinema directly related to the *bat-ke* film, the multiplex film. While the films comprising the 'first generation' of multiplex cinema, such as *Ek Hasina Thi* (2004), *Jism* (2003) and *Murder* (2004), experiment with what Gopal calls "the couple-form," no attempt is made to create new forms of conjugation; rather, as Gopal goes on to



note, "the couple is stranded between the conjugal models of old and New Bollywood."<sup>3</sup>

Thus even as the advent of the first generation of multiplex films in India signaled a major departure from the traditional Bollywood formula, as the eponymous venues for these films became more widespread, this first wave gave way to a second generation of multiplex films such as *Hattrick* (2007), *Salaam-e-Ishteq* (2007) and *Life...in a Metro* (2010) which increasingly focused on what Gopal has called "the new sociology" of the Indian couple.<sup>4</sup> In relation to these earlier manifestations of the so-called 'multiplex' film, one could argue that *SDR* re-forms (without necessarily reforming) the conjugal model of Bollywood, positioning itself as part of what could be called the third generation in such a filmic genealogy. Synthesizing elements not only of the previous two generations of the multiplex film but also, more generally, of the *bat-ke* and Bollywood filmic styles, *SDR* employs certain elements of the Bollywood formula—for instance, the song and dance sequence—even as it updates or deglamorizes them.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, in redeploying these earlier elements, *SDR* marks a significant turn from earlier waves of this new filmic movement, shifting the

focus from the postnuptial couple to the post-coital affairs of *prenuptial* couples.

A final important way in which *SDR* marks a shift in the ongoing reformulations of onscreen conjugal dynamics in popular Hindi cinema is by repositioning its storyline in an Indian, rather than NRI (Non-Resident Indian) context. As the title claims, this is a *shuddh desi* romance, i.e., a purely Indian romance. In the process of doing so, *SDR* recalibrates the previous trajectory in which India's increasing proximity to the West was seen as marking a more progressive template in terms of sexual and cultural mores. Such a paradigm is literally turned on its head with films such as *SDR* which, along with Sharma's previous two films, can be seen as exemplifying a new breed of Bollywood cinema.

#### Notes

- 1 See, e.g., Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998).
- 2 Sangita Gopal, *Conjugations: Marriage and Form in New Bollywood Cinema* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2011).
- 3 Ibid., p. 136.
- 4 Ibid., p. 137.
- 5 Anita Gates, "Redefining Bollywood Love Stories," *New York Times*, 8 September 2013.



# Two Approaches to School Violence

BY ROBERT K. LIGHTNING

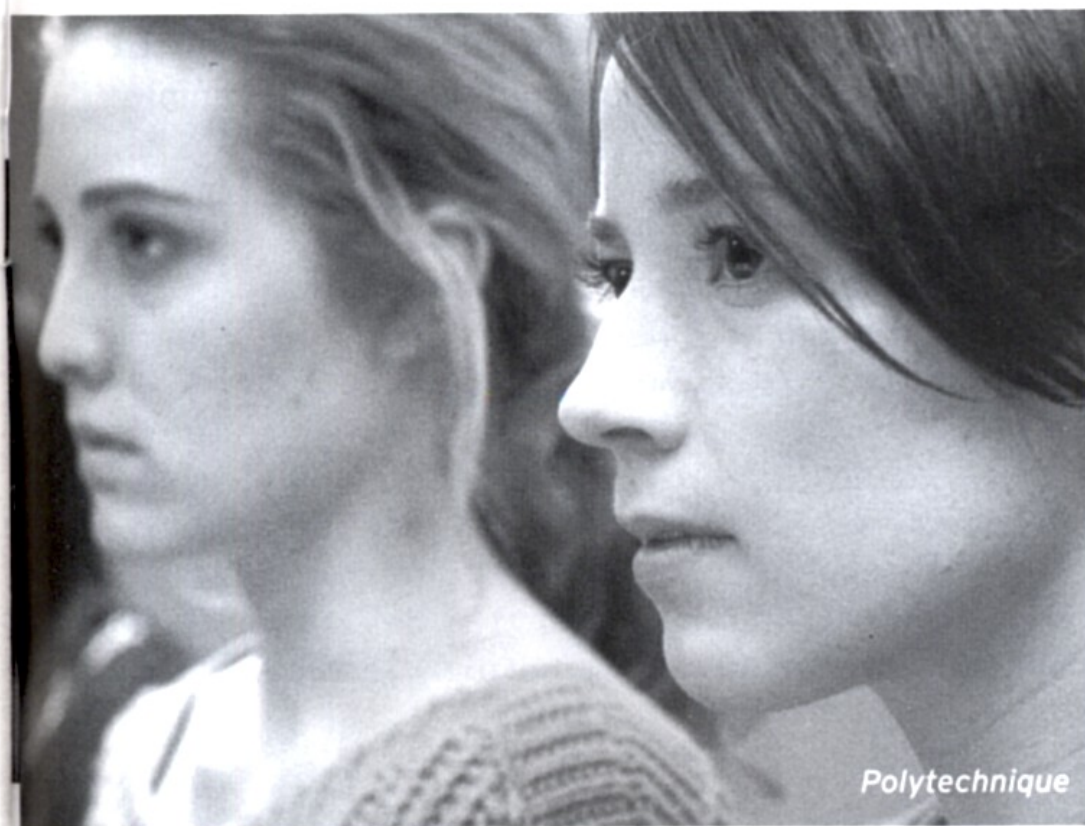
Based on the 1989 massacre at Montréal's Polytechnique School (and its aftermath, which included the suicides of several of the school's students), *Polytechnique* (Denis Villeneuve, 2009) invites obvious comparison with Gus Van Sant's 2003 *Elephant* (widely interpreted as a meditation on the Columbine high school massacre). In fact *Polytechnique* shares several textual elements with the earlier film. (Among them the offering of scientific theory as an apparent metaphor for the coming massacre and the presentation of a sensitive, passive male who tries to prevent the approaching disaster). The obvious similarities between the two films seems practically to invite an intertextual reading and, while not coming to any conclusions about either film, I would like to attempt such a reading at this time. Both films seem to me to merit further critical attention, *Polytechnique* because it represents an admirable and comparatively straightforward and respectful (that is, neither opportunistic nor sensational) attempt to deal with the subject of mass murder and *Elephant* because it remains a film fascinating in its formal structure if perplexing in its intent.

## Parallels Between Killer and Victim

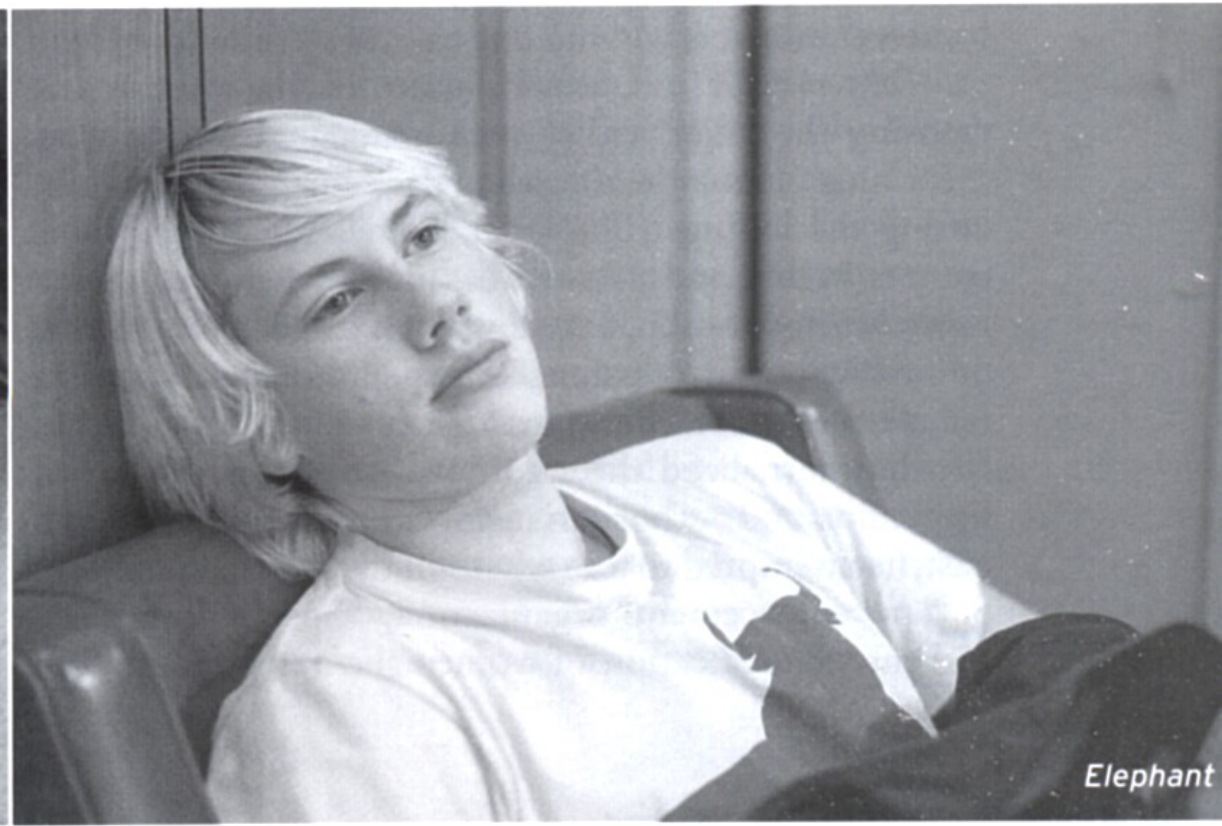
Despite the diversity of Van Sant's student population, an underlying dichotomy seems to unite two students: Alex (Alex Frost), one of the killers, and Nathan (Nathan

Tyson), one of his (presumed) victims. They are linked by, among other things, music, specifically Beethoven's Piano Sonata n° 2 (the "Moonlight"). The Beethoven is the musical accompaniment to Nathan's introduction as he plays football with fellow male students and it continues as he departs from the game and maneuvers, unobstructed, through a maze of student activity toward a rendezvous with his girlfriend, the music's dark romanticism characterizing him as the student body's dark-haired 'dream'. (As he walks, he is admired from afar by a trio of female students). It is this music that Alex is later heard practicing on piano when, during a difficult passage, he falters and instead turns his attention toward the online purchase of guns, a moment which further links the two scenes and thus the two young men: Alex's physical 'clumsiness' in performing the Beethoven contrasts with the physical ease and athleticism Nathan displays when introduced. Alex's flawed performance thus marks him as Nathan's dark-haired social opposite. (He is seemingly also identified as the 'elephant-in-the-room' to which the film's title apparently refers, Van Sant placing an elephant literally *in* his room via a drawing of an elephant, seen as the camera circles the room during this performance).

*Polytechnique* also establishes a dichotomy between characters, one based upon gender itself as well as gender norms (to which I will return). As in the actual massacre the film's assassin (Maxim Gaudette) is driven by a hatred of feminism and as a consequence he targets only female students (killing 14 women in the actual case). Appropriately then, the film juxtaposes his progress



Polytechnique



Elephant



toward the killing spree with that of one of his future victims, a young female aeronautics student named Val (Karine Vanasse). Their parallel progressions are told in terms of both similarities (he shaves, she shaves) and differences (he shaves his face, she her legs), primarily the latter. The male/female schism will structure the entire film, continuing after the massacre when, surviving the attack, Val's actions are then juxtaposed with those of a surviving male student.

### Masculinity

Patriarchal gender construction is one system implied as causing the massacre in *Elephant* and the film offers a detailed critique. The Nathan/Alex dichotomy is central here, with Nathan offered as the cultural ideal of masculinity (competitive, social, aggressive) and Alex his opposite (self-critical, asocial, passive/hyper-aggressive). That the two forms of masculinity operate within a hierarchy rather than in isolation becomes clear in their two encounters in the film, the first in the science class where Nathan and a friend humiliate Alex by pummeling him with spit balls, and at the conclusion where Alex hunts down Nathan and his girlfriend and literally 'returns fire', presumably shooting them to death.

The characters of Elias (McConnell) and John (Robinson) represent medians of masculinity in *Elephant*. Both are confidently social like Nathan but both also share qualities with Alex: Elias shares his creativity (Elias is a photographer) and John like Alex is overburdened by personal and social pressures (an alcoholic father, harassment at the hands of the by-the-book assistant school principal). An implied critique of Alex (whose deadly retaliation against his oppressors suggests, despite his better qualities, his hapless internalization of the culture's masculine norms) is suggested by both characters and through John (who survives the massacre) hope for the future. (A third figure, the black student Benny/Benny Dixon, also represents positive masculinity – like John he tries to intercede in the calamity – but he remains throughout mysteriously situated by Van Sant between inclusion and exclusion: He plays football in the opening scene yet interacts with no one else throughout the film).

*Polytechnique*, too, offers a masculine dichotomy, juxtaposing the killer with a male student, Jean-François (Sébastien Huberdeau), who tries to intercept him during the killings. The killer blames feminists for his failures in life and as such has deliberately targeted a *polytechnic* institution, where women can advance to traditionally male professions. (His penultimate victim is a female science teacher, next to whom he dies). He has clearly internalized the traditional masculine norms of aggression and authoritarianism (we are told that, in the past, he attempted to join what sounds like a paramilitary or law enforcement organization, "Special Services") and the objectification of women (he is a peeping Tom

and has a pinup calendar). Unlike Alex, he is presented almost completely without sympathy.

It is through his counterpart Jean-François that the film offers a more complex critique of masculinity. Like John in *Elephant*, he tries to warn others of the killings and even aids victims as he follows the killer's trail of destruction. Like Benny he aspires to apprehend the killer to prevent more killing but, unlike Benny, fails to take decisive action at critical moments. The first instance occurs in the film's first massacre, when the armed killer enters a classroom, separates the men from the women and directs the men *from* the classroom, he with the other men following the killer's directive (the film's most disturbing reenactment of the actual event), the killer subsequently shooting all the women. The second occurs when he again encounters the killer face to face and flees.

The incursion of doubt and fear at critical moments, perfectly understandable human responses to danger, runs counter to cultural norms of masculinity and the film implies that this weighs heavily upon the sensitive male following the massacre, leading to self-imposed social isolation (recalling that of the loner killer) and an act of passive self-destruction (he commits suicide) that inverts the killer's destructive actions. He and the killer are simultaneously doubles *and* opposites and the film offers no alternative male figures to modify the implied critique of masculinity.

### Feminism

The feminist politics of both films' are clearly evident from their shared critical view of patriarchal masculinity. In *Elephant* this is continuous with a critique of patriarchal *femininity*, specifically the objectification of women, which is presented as both institutionally imposed (the P.E. teacher who insists that an awkward plain girl wear shorts rather than sweats to gym class) and pathologically embraced (three bulimic girls who engage in group vomiting). Only one girl can be viewed as resistant (Michelle/Kristen Hicks, the quietly defiant plain girl whose character, as an outsider like Alex, implies an alternative to destructive masculine behavior in response to social alienation) and only one represents a positive femininity (Acadia/Alicia Miles, who comforts a distressed John). Otherwise, women (let alone a positive femininity) are hardly the director's primary interest.

By contrast, female solidarity and heroism are central to *Polytechnique's* politics. In contrast to the killer, whose male roommate barely acknowledges him when he leaves their apartment, Val's female roommate is actively involved in her life, assisting her in preparation for an interview for an internship. (Ironically, the more feminine costume she coerces her to wear has no effect on the bigoted male interviewer, the film's representative of institutional sexism). Most movingly, just before being



shot by the assassin, the female students in the classroom (including the roommates) lock hands in solidarity and mutual emotional support.

Val's commitment to her roommate even survives the latter's death. In the aftermath of the massacre, Val (who proves the film's heroine) courageously struggles to carry on with her life, her efforts remaining in solidarity with her late roommate: In apparent homage to her friend, Val dyes her hair the same color (blonde) and also takes up her habit of smoking.

## Sexuality

In *Elephant* the sexuality of Alex and co-conspirator Eric (Deulen) has been much debated. As several critics have consigned them unambiguous gay status, it is worth noting that in their only overt expression of gay desire, the shower scene, 1) the look of surprise on Alex's face when Eric enters the shower and 2) they kiss (at least ostensibly) because neither has ever been kissed before. (And both presumably expect to die). Whatever Van Sant's intended reading of their sexuality, the heterosexual norm is nowhere endorsed in the film and the representative heterosexual relationship (Nathan and Carrie) is noteworthy for its negativity. The Nathan-led spitball attack on Alex implies a repressed homosexual impulse on Nathan's part, the projection of wet wads of white paper by one male at another male carrying an obvious suggestion of sexual aggression, aggression which Nathan's engagement in normative masculine activity (the parallel male-group activity of the football game, where the projectile is instead a ball) fails to completely regulate. And the only thing we learn about Carrie (Finklea) is of her jealous attack upon another girl for looking at Nathan, her role in the idealized heterosexual couple apparently being her sole distinction in the social world depicted.

Two of the film's most positive male figures, John and Elias, are sexually undefined (although both seem to provoke female interest). It is perhaps noteworthy that all but one of the members of the Gay/Straight alliance (which includes Acadia) escape the slaughter unharmed.

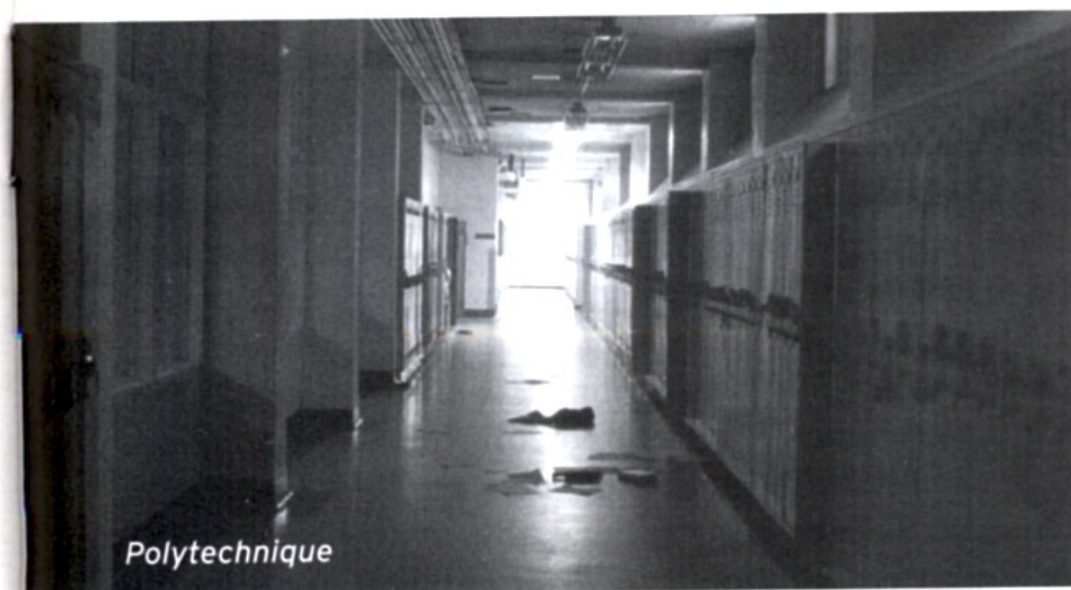
Similarly, *Polytechnique* nowhere endorses the heterosexual norm. At the conclusion Val is cohabitating with

a male science instructor but is still haunted by nightmares of the event. (She is also pregnant). When he tries to comfort her, she winces while he embraces her, suggesting that the violence inflicted upon her by one man has (understandably) affected her feelings for other men. Despite her lover's solicitousness, there is no evidence that her current heterosexual attachment has replaced in intensity her prior homosocial one.

## The endings

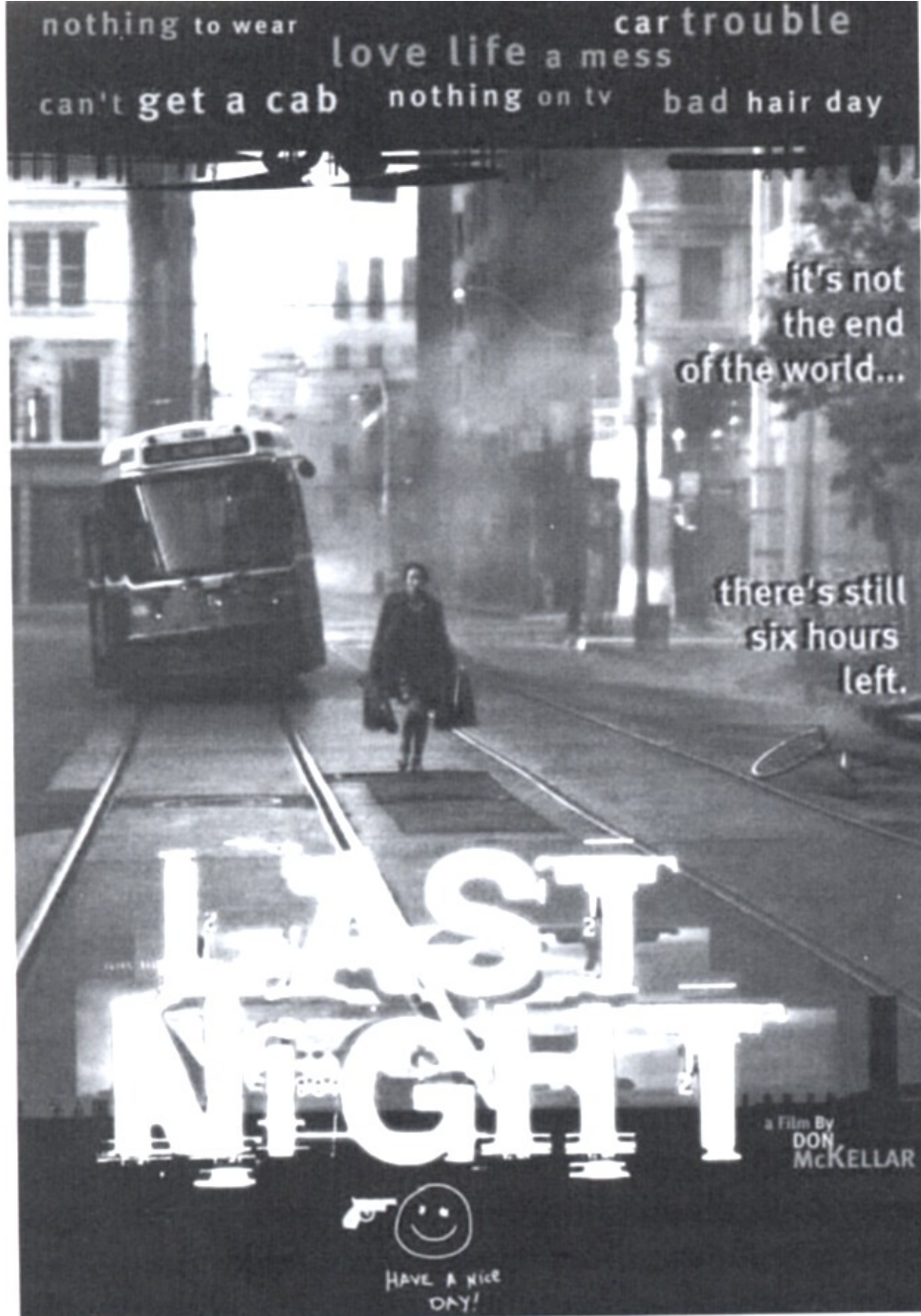
Somewhat sentimentally, both films find hope for the future in family relationships. At the conclusion of *Elephant* John reunites (both physically and emotionally) with his alcoholic father, the father whose incongruous wish to go hunting (expressed to his son in the film's opening scene and to which the massacre seems the film's critical response) both encapsulates the film's concerns with masculinity, impotence (note his alcoholism), and violence and extends them to the contemporary adult world as well as to the worlds of history and myth, hunting as a skill having long outlived its necessity for human survival. At the conclusion of *Polytechnique* (in the film's one misstep), Val composes a letter to the killer's mother (acknowledging at the same time that she will probably never send it), stating that when *she* is a mother she will teach her child, if a daughter, that "the world is hers" and, if a boy, "to love", the latter particularly oversimplifying all that has gone before.

*Polytechnique* is the more tragic of the two films, its tragic tone deriving from its more direct and visceral rendering of human loss: No one could say of it (as was said of *Elephant* in the pages of *Cineaction* some years ago) that it "...builds on the mysterious beauty of the everyday..." or that it "...retains an elusive poetic beauty..." Although I think that *Elephant* is more complex than this description implies, its obvious formal grace is purchased at the cost of (and masks) certain textual perplexities, not the least of which lies in the symbolic meaning of 1) the film's *selection* of victims and 2) *how* their deaths are rendered. Certain victims (Nathan and Carrie, the bulimic girls, Elias), being young, white, social and sexually appealing, approximate the heterosexual social ideal epitomized in the film by Nathan and Carrie and thus symbolically represent the social world from which Alex and Eric are excluded. Their deaths are *not* shown. Other victims (Benny, Michelle, assistant principal Luce, Eric himself), being outside that sphere, quite possibly represent (for the killers, for the director) the killers' despised mirror image. Their deaths are rendered graphically. To my knowledge this discrimination in selection and presentation has not been acknowledged or even recognized by the film's admirers and my own feelings remain mixed about the director's intentions here. *Polytechnique* raises no such doubts about intent and it is to its credit that discrimination belongs only to the film's assassin.



*Polytechnique*





# Constructions of Non-Diegetic Hope in Don McKellar's *Last Night*

BY DAVID CHRISTOPHER

The turn of the twenty-first century witnessed a deluge of American apocalypse films. Films such as *Independence Day* (1996), *Armageddon* (1998), *Deep Impact* (1998), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), and *2012* (2009) articulate fears regarding the demise of American culture in the face of interstellar or ecological disaster. These films all focus on possible causes of apocalypse, and how the actions of predominantly male American heroes, under the patriarchy of the American industrial military complex, might save the world from disaster. The fundamental question these films pose is "If you found out the world was going to end, what would you do to stop it?" *Last Night* (1998) is a single representative example of a Canadian film that explores the apocalypse from a distinctly different perspective. *Last Night* follows the interconnected narrative trajectories of various characters as they live out their final moments on earth and concerns itself with a more open ended question: "If you found out the world was going to end, what would you do?" Reasons for the characters' fear and unhappiness are all personal and social. Larger ecological causes or causes stemming from lacking governmental intervention, distant from a heroic individual and beyond their control, are irrelevant to the narrative. *Last Night* ends with what seems to be the death of all life on earth. Does this mean

that the Canadian apocalypse film is void of themes of hope? The question seems counter-intuitive to a film so full of folly, levity, and revelation. However, if all the characters die where can the hope be? Hope, in the form of social revelation within the diegesis of *Last Night*, is aimed more directly at an audience that will survive the fictitious apocalypse and puts the audience in conversation with the narrative rather than distancing them from it as with the American apocalypse blockbuster.

One of the most interesting aspects of the Hollywood blockbuster apocalypse film is that the apocalypse never happens. Perhaps the most obvious example of this characteristic occurs in *Armageddon*. This film depicts a ludicrous resolution in which the asteroid that threatens the destruction of life on earth is successfully diverted from its collision course in a spectacular space mission. Many American apocalypse films focus on the discovery of cause and a plan to avert annihilation. *Independence Day*, *Deep Impact*, and *Armageddon* all deal with interstellar threats to the life on earth. These films locate the cause of the potential apocalypse within the scope of an alien other, either sentient or not. Following 9/11 the source of apocalypse became more mundane. *The Day After Tomorrow* and *2012*, for example, consider global warming the ecological source of potential disaster. In *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era* Douglas Kellner suggests that these films emerged as an expression of the anxieties experienced by Western



culture in the face of mismanaged foreign, industrial, and ecological policy by the Bush-Cheney administration.<sup>1</sup> “Whenever social anxieties proliferate, films and fantasy evoke social apocalypse, a trope evident in the Hollywood films of the 2000s that articulate worries about environmental crisis and socioeconomic and political collapse.”<sup>2</sup> However, these films attempt to displace responsibility for the apocalypse away from American culture. For example, in *Independence Day*, David’s recycling efforts and his concerns about nuclear fallout are trivialized against the threat of alien invasion. Once the source of apocalypse has been traced and displaced onto a specifically non-American source, the fantasy of aversion can play itself out. While the earth might take a beating and major populations are obliterated, these films all end with the clear indication that life on earth will continue on its merry way having avoided annihilation.

In its simplest articulation the American apocalypse film is an escapist fantasy that valorizes the power of American patriarchy on a global scale. More specifically, these films valorize a patriarchal culture characterized by paternal relations and the glory of the American military complex. In *2012*, a single father (John Cusack) assists his ex-wife and children to survive the destruction of Los Angeles and eventually escape onto a Noah’s-ark-like submarine (designed by the American industrial military complex) in which the wealthiest families on earth have purchased their way on board. In *The Day After Tomorrow*, another single father, Jack (Dennis Quaid) survives a flash ice-age only to trek across the new tundra to rescue his only son. In this example the mother is almost entirely effaced from the narrative. At the film’s closure they depart an ice-covered New York City to find refuge in a makeshift American military outpost established somewhere in Central America. *Independence Day* is replete with various incarnations of the heroic and patriarchal father. It is also *Independence Day* that valorizes the American military perhaps more than any of the other films. Once David (Jeff Goldblum) discovers the alien invaders’ weakness, the American military springs into action and spreads the word globally. A British soldier stationed in Iraq reports that “the Americans ... want to launch a counter offensive” to which his superior officer responds, “It’s about bloody time. What do they plan to do?” Similar reactions are depicted in the Russian and Japanese militaries which are also somehow still intact. Apparently, all other national militaries are entirely subordinate to the American power and could do little else but wait for their American heroes to save the day. *Armageddon* goes so far as to tie the ecologically destructive force of oil drilling into its narrative of salvation. The American military in conjunction with NASA is powerless to launch a defensive strategy against a threatening asteroid without the assistance of maverick oil tycoons Harry Stamper (Bruce Willis) and A. J. Frost (Ben Affleck). Between them they play out the father-son

reconciliation melodrama while saving the earth with their oil drilling skills and the assistance of NASA and the American military. These films deny any implication that the American economy is to blame for potential apocalypse, and play out a fantasy that the paternal hero within the American patriarchal military structure remains the best hope for life on earth.

However, in all of these American apocalypse blockbusters both the threat of apocalypse and hope for humanity remain securely within the diegesis of the film. An audience member can only achieve suture with these characters at a specific remove under the suspension of disbelief. In “Film and Cultural Identity,” Rey Chow defines suture as a process of interpellation whereby a viewer is tied into a narrative subjectively by identifying with a character or characters.<sup>3</sup> It is this process that causes us as viewers to desire certain characters to triumph and others to fall. With a fictitious narrative, a suspension of disbelief is an inherent part of this process. Since fantastical patriarchal heroes are so disparate from the lived realities of most viewers, these films require an even greater suspension of disbelief. This necessity is satisfied by the propensity of Hollywood films to employ a form of realism in which style is rendered invisible and narrative continuity is paramount. Moreover, the survival and triumph of the heroes in the American apocalypse blockbuster occurs entirely within the diegetic narrative. Beyond the diegesis of the film, identification can only be part of a latent construction of subjectivity involving processes of displacement, transfer, and condensation. The viewer is not immediately implicated in the fantasy social constructs of these narratives in any other way. It is the characters on-screen that survive the apocalypse in a regime of spectacle and melodrama.

*Last Night*, one Canadian response to such films, differs from its American cousin in various ways. Instead of melodramatic spectacle, *Last Night* takes an approach that is closer kin to social realism. *Last Night* follows the intersecting and elliptical narrative strands of several characters resident in Toronto in the last six hours before global apocalypse. Almost immediately the film identifies itself as a reaction against its American cousin. The opening scene shows Patrick prostrate on his floor dressing for dinner with his family. Framed from above, Patrick appears upside down on the two-dimensional screen. The image is disorienting and highlights that the narrative to follow will be an inversion of what might typically be expected of an apocalypse film. Moreover, the image blatantly indicates a sense of direction that points due south and identifies the United States as the target of the satire that accompanies the image in the form of the voice heard from Patrick’s answering machine. It is Duncan calling from the gas company to thank him for his patronage. Of course, Duncan’s loyalty to his job is ludicrous in the last hours on earth and further satirizes apocalypse narratives in which Americans



remain inexplicably loyal to their governmental or military jobs until the bitter end. In *Last Night* Sandra points out that the government disbanded months ago. In this context, Duncan's strange behavior is rewarded with violent death. He is the only character in the film to meet such an end before the film concludes. It is the only graphic spectacle of fatal violence in the film.

Admittedly, *Last Night* was constructed under very different conditions of production that would not allow for the spectacle of special effects that are characteristic of the American apocalypse blockbusters. In his 1998 article, "Redefining Cinema: International and Avant-Garde Alternatives," Stephen Crofts observes that

other varieties of nation-state cinema production fight over the remainder [of audience markets], their principal enemy being Hollywood, which dominates most anglophone [sic] markets and exerts considerable influence through the United States' world-wide strategic, economic, and cultural links.<sup>4</sup>

However the lack of spectacle in *Last Night* is not exclusively a symptom of economic constraints. McKellar's mise-en-scene is clearly intentional. The world of *Last Night* is excessively mundane, banal, and bleak. At the beginning of the film, it is 6:00pm and the city is not aglow with the twinkling lights of a dusky cityscape but rather awash with excessive blanching light. As Sandra approaches the supermarket the streets are nearly deserted and in a state of disrepair. The announcer on her radio is droning and monotone. He plays the somewhat banal easy listening hit "Last Night I Didn't get to Sleep at All" by The 5<sup>th</sup> Dimension. The market is filled with long aisles of empty looted shelves in the bleak, high-contrast lighting that shows Sandra nearly in silhouette. This world is drab and unexciting, entirely lacking anything that might be considered spectacle. It is a sort of inverse spectacle—an emphatically banal and almost colorless world. It is small wonder that Sandra's startlingly red car attracts the attention of street looters. The looters wear black, grey, and white and seem to blend in seamlessly with their bland surroundings. Several of them saunter aimlessly towards her car like zombies that have already succumbed to the inevitable death before them. Overall the mise-en-scene might be read as a metaphor of the barren emotional landscape the characters inhabit until they achieve some sort of social revelation.

*Last Night* is replete with didactic messages of social revelation. Kellner appreciates this aspect of even the American apocalypse film. "These films can thus be read as allegories of the disintegration of social life and civil society, and the emergence of a Darwinian nightmare where the struggle for survival occurs in a Hobbesian world where life is nasty, brutish, and short."<sup>5</sup> Certainly

*Last Night* depicts moments of a "disintegration of social life and civil society." Sandra's car is terribly vandalized. Several anarchists in the street attempt to tip a bus on which there is a distraught mother and her terrified daughter. A character named Marty barks at his girlfriend to "shut up" while he revels in threatening Duncan with a shotgun. Later Duncan is shown shot through the head. Sandra is nearly assaulted by street thugs before she is rescued by Alex who nearly beheads her assailant with a spade. However, in *Last Night* the disintegration of social life is concomitant with the emergence of an ideologically uncommitted society. The social code is in flux and 'common sense' has become ambiguous. In this environment of anarchy and freedom, social revelation can occur. As the social order breaks down in public, the main characters struggle to redefine their own social and moral code.

Much of the film renders the established social code risible, especially in the face of the inevitably mortal human condition. At the gas company office, Donna admits to her boss Duncan that she took a drink every night at 6pm. He responds, "I could fire you for this." They both chuckle at how ludicrous the notion is. Similarly, Craig and Patrick have an argument over the ownership of a car. Since the apocalypse is imminent, ownership is academic. Nevertheless, in response to Patrick's request to give Sandra the car, Craig states that he "wanted to die the owner of three cars." This dialogue satirizes and interrogates commodity fetishism and how it can supersede social relations when they are mediated by material goods. When compared against the importance of assisting a fellow human being in the face of imminent mortality, materialism loses its lustre.

Regardless of his materialism, Craig is perhaps the most socially progressive character in the film. He is certainly the least repressed. Craig is coded as a metaphor for the acquisition of self awareness and self-actualization. As he is about to have relations with Lily he awkwardly informs her, "I'm not doing this because you're black." She blithely responds, "Yes you are. You don't have to lie." Throughout the film Craig plays out a release of sexual repression. He asserts that Patrick could benefit from such a release. Patrick is mourning the death of his wife at the expense of his own socialization. Craig observes, "What is one death compared to the fact that in a couple hours every human soul on earth is gonna evaporate?" Craig goes on to articulate some of the film's most didactic notions.

You have to take life in your own hands. You have to fulfill your own destiny. I'm sure there are things you feel ripped off about ... I tried to ask myself what did I want. What were those experiences that I had hoped for that were now just passing me by ... Some of these things were hard to achieve. Some of these things were hard



to admit ... I'm not going to my grave with any regrets.

He concludes by making the motives of his speech clear to Patrick. "I was trying to inspire you." Against Craig's sexual liberation, Patrick is characterized as someone who desperately needs to escape the social gulag of his mourning.

In terms of the social lessons the movie offers, the whole film might be reduced to a single metaphor: referring to his deceased wife, Patrick states that "She died and then they said the world would end." The emotional fallout from her death is likened to the end of the world for him—an apocalypse that has already occurred. As a result, he withdraws from the social order. Several characters in the film articulate messages that counter this anti-social lifestyle. Patrick's father warns Jenny, "You be careful when you leave. Don't go out in the streets unless you have to." She is dismissive. "Oh, come on, dad. They're safe. They're just having fun." Her boyfriend Alex articulates the message even more clearly. "People want to experience things and we're all going to die anyway." The message is emphasized by the fact that Jenny and Alex lie to her parents. Instead of going to visit Alex's parents as they claim they will, they join the revelry in the streets. Initially Patrick is defensive against Alex's perspective and chooses to spend his final moments alone in his apartment. In his discussions with Sandra, Patrick points out the fundamental lesson they both need to learn. "What I do find sad and what I do find pathetic is people who don't know themselves." During the earth's twilight moments, Sandra and Patrick frantically attempt to get to know each other, and themselves. They succeed but just barely. Sandra is racked with emotion as she is unable to communicate with her husband in her desperate attempt to get to him before it is too late. Neither she nor Patrick can be with their respective spouses—both of their spouses are already dead. Just before it is too late, Patrick and Sandra decide to spend their last moments together. Patrick learns how to get close to someone other than his wife. Sandra learns that 'the best laid schemes oft gang a-gley,' and that she loves Patrick. The social lessons seem clear: don't be consumed by the past, get out and live life, know thyself, and don't wait until it is too late to reach such revelations.

Unlike the American apocalypse blockbuster which seems to valorize patriarchal culture, *Last Night* revolves around a different set of concerns which address the notion of a satisfying death. While surviving the apocalypse is central to the Hollywood blockbuster, *Last Night*, contains no such hope for survival. The cause of the impending apocalypse is almost entirely effaced from the narrative. None of the characters are even remotely concerned with averting it. It is already inevitable. Instead, the main characters all seem to experience social revelations from their interactions under such duress. It all

ends with a kiss as Patrick and Sandra succumb to the passion of the moment. This might seem like little more than typical Hollywood romantic closure in which the heteronormative family structure can reproduce itself. However, Sandra is carrying another man's child—a child that can never be born—and the romance between Patrick and Sandra can never be fulfilled. It begins at the moment the world ends. This ending is more about self-realization before inevitable death than a normalization of the heterosexual romantic couple. Since all the characters die, any hope generated by social revelations within the narrative diegesis cannot serve them any purpose other than a satisfying death.

Inherent to the fact that the characters all die in *Last Night* is the fact that its life lessons must be aimed at an audience that will survive the end of the film. With *Last Night* suture has less to do with a suspension of disbelief and more directly implicates the viewer in its moralizing message. The film is replete with the apostrophes voiced by Craig, Alex, and Patrick that are absent in the American apocalypse blockbusters and that might be read as directly addressing the audience. In the context of overcoming social barriers Mme. Carlton offers the encouragement that Patrick will reiterate to Menzies. "We all knew you had it in you." It is the only phrase in the film repeated more than once. The repetition of this message invites the viewer to examine its implications on a personal level.

As the film ends the apocalypse is depicted by a fade to light that washes over everything on the screen. This less spectacular cinematic apocalypse offers a metaphor of enlightenment experienced by the characters and shared with an audience that can now carry the film's message of hope out of the theatre and into the rest of their lives. Viewers might have the opportunity to apply some of the film's socially didactic messages before it is too late to achieve their own satisfying death. Admittedly, such a message of hope is fundamentally morbid, but it is what one might reasonably expect from an apocalypse film. It is less fantastical than the messages contained in American apocalypse blockbusters and it is aimed more directly at the viewer. At the very least, *Last Night* offers the hope that you can die happy if not American.

## Notes

- 1 Kellner, Douglas. *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era*. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, 81.
- 2 Kellner, Douglas. *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era*. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, 81.
- 3 Chow, Rey. "Film and Cultural Identity." *Film Studies: Critical Approaches*, eds. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 171.
- 4 Crofts, Stephen. "Concepts of National Cinema." *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, eds. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 392.
- 5 Kellner, Douglas. *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era*. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, 91.



# Beware of 'The Dog'

An Archaeology of a Thoroughly Mediated Event in the Life of a Bank Robber

BY SUSAN MORRISON

At TIFF this year, my decision to see Allison Berg and Frank Keraudren's documentary *The Dog* was not a disinterested one. While I had always liked Sidney Lumet's 1975 film *Dog Day Afternoon*, it was a 2 channel art installation by French artist Pierre Huyghe called "The Third Memory" (1999) screened at the Guggenheim NY's "Moving Pictures" in 2002 that prompted me to delve more deeply into the real-life character/caricature called John Wojtowicz, the (nominal) subject of these three iterations of the particular moment in his life which propelled him to celebrity status. An integral part of my interest was the question concerning mode of presentation—feature film, gallery film installation, documentary—and the opportunity it offered to consider what each form brings to the table. In order to simplify this potentially labyrinthine task, I have structured this quest chronologically for an archaeology of the facts.

## Aug. 22, 1972    The Real Event    15 hours

Forty-one years ago, on a hot summer's day in late August, an attempted robbery took place at a small Brooklyn bank which was reported on the next evening's national news.<sup>1</sup> While bank robberies were daily occurrences in the New York area at that time, this one presented enough uncommon features to make it newsworthy. The facts of the case as reported were that, while the robbery was in progress, the bank was surrounded by 200 police and FBI agents, dozens of journalists, and hundreds of local bystanders who cheered on and applauded the perpetrators. What had started as a simple robbery soon turned into a hostage-taking, resulting in a 15 hour standoff between the police, the FBI and the 2 would-be robbers. Perhaps the most uncommon feature was that one of the two perpetrators, John Wojtowicz, described by the TV reporter as an "admitted homosexual", had asked to see his male wife, Ernest Aron, who, when brought to the bank site, subsequently refused to meet with Wojtowicz. The hostage-taking presently transformed into a hijacking



when the robbers insisted on a jet plane to carry them out of the country. At the airport, the FBI managed to disarm and arrest 27 year old Wojtowicz, and shot and killed the other robber, an 18 year old named Sal Naturile.<sup>2</sup>

The 'live' video footage used to illustrate the TV news report showed Wojtowicz, outside the bank, dressed in a white t-shirt and dark slacks, walking up and down in front gesticulating to the police while telling them to back off. There are reverse shots of the police, crouched down behind their cars, guns pointing, and of the crowd gathered as an audience for this spectacular event. Wojtowicz is also shown talking to some cops while half inside the bank's door. Then a night shot of the airport limo pulling up in front of the bank, with the robbers and hostages exiting the bank for the limo, and the procession of cars, lights flashing and sirens blaring, as they drove to the airport. The segment ends with a shot of a sign posted on the bank's door notifying the public that the bank was closed, and the reporter's oddly humorous comment that the former hostages, while freed, did not show up for work the next day.

## Sept. 22, 1972    "The Boys in the Bank"

Exactly one month later, *Life* magazine published "The Boys in the Bank",<sup>3</sup> an article by P.F. Kluge and Thomas Moore that documented the botched robbery in an expanded manner, changing the tone from the disinterested (though bemused) reportage of the initial news item to a "Jimmy Breslin/The Gang that Couldn't Shoot Straight" type of embellished narration filled with colourful characters who all seem to be nice people, even when brandishing guns and threatening to shoot hostages. The bank manager, for instance, is quoted as having said to Wojtowicz, "I'm supposed to hate you guys, but I've had more laughs tonight than I've had in weeks." And one of the tellers, said, "If they had been my houseguests on a Saturday night, it would have been hilarious. Especially with John's antics, the way he hopped around all over the place, the way he talked ... I really liked them both. They tried to be nice—except when they were cornered. Such aboveboard guys, they even told



us they would kill us if they had to.”

In the article, the relationship between Wojtowicz and Ernest Aron is opened up to reveal, first, that John was previously married to a woman, Carmen Bifulco, with whom he had two children; second, after a “bizarre drag” wedding with 300 guests in 1971, Wojtowicz and Aron had marital difficulties which soon led to their separation; and third, that Wojtowicz claimed to have initiated the bank robbery in order to finance a sex change operation for Aron.<sup>4</sup> As was its custom, *Life* illustrated the story copiously. There are 5 photojournalist shots of the bank robbery (3 of Wojtowicz, in a white t shirt and dark slacks negotiating with the police outside the bank, 2 of other police taking shelter behind cars for protection), 1 of Ernest in a bathrobe with unkempt hair being escorted by two policemen to the scene; 1 after the event, in the bank, with the bank manager and his assistant posing for the camera; and 3 ‘backfill’ shots—1 a wedding photo of John and Carmen, 1 of Theresa Basso, John’s mother, lovingly holding up his army uniform (he had fought in Vietnam); and a glamour shot of Ernest in drag, with blonde bouffant hairdo, drop earrings, and a dark coat clasped around her shoulders. Of particular note (for our purposes) is that Wojtowicz was said to possess the “broken-faced good looks of an Al Pacino or Dustin Hoffman.”

**Sept. 21, 1975   Sidney Lumet   *Dog Day Afternoon*   125 minutes**

Three years later, Sidney Lumet’s *Dog Day Afternoon* was released. Written by Frank Pierson, it was based on the *Life* magazine article about the robbery, keeping all of the main details of the event while making some changes for dramatic purposes.<sup>5</sup> One of the most notable interventions was that Pierson added a political note to what was originally a personal story when he has Sonny make pointed reference to the 1971 Attica prison uprising (brutally suppressed by the state troopers and National Guard). In the now canonical scene, Al Pacino as Sonny struts back and forth in front of the bank, arm raised, shouting “Attica, Attica” to the delight of the raucous crowd. It’s apparent that the scene is based on the photographs and video footage of Wojtowicz in front of the bank—he’s dressed in similar fashion, with white shirt standing in for white t-shirt, but with the cry to the police to move back augmented with the more interesting (and more acceptable) insistence to remember a moment of police brutality, thereby shifting his role from perpetrator to victim.

While the sexual politics are an important part of the film and Sonny’s character, Wojtowicz’s real life relationships were simplified to exclude the appearance at the site of the bank robbery of another more recent male lover brought to the scene whose most public farewell kiss to Wojtowicz drew hoots and jeers from the onlookers.<sup>6</sup> Instead, by focusing on the (fictional) steadfast devotion of Sonny to Leon, the film presents a heterosexual audience with a less fickle, more ‘admirable’ lover with whom they could identify.

The film’s original title was *The Boys in the Bank*—the

same as the *Life* article—but Lumet insisted on changing it as he thought it inferred a more lightweight comedic film than he intended.<sup>7</sup> As the robbery had occurred during the ‘dog days’ of August, the replacement title was *Dog Day Afternoon*.<sup>8</sup> The casting of Al Pacino, fresh from his double triumphs as Michael Corleone in the Godfather films I (1972) and II (1974), was particularly brilliant; not only did he actually look like Wojtowicz (cf the ABC news footage and photographs), but his ability to act through the gamut of extreme personality traits required—from charming though goofy through unpredictable and threatening, combined with a spot-on Brooklynese accent and perfect comic timing—created an unforgettable character, Sonny Wortzik, an anti-hero for the 70s and beyond. Sonny’s tender vulnerability and apparent concern for others offset the less admirable aspects of his actions, with the result that the audience was drawn to what would have been otherwise a difficult and off-putting character. The second bank robber was portrayed by John Cazale, who did not resemble the real Sal Naturile. Cazale was much older at 37, a difference of almost 20 years. (Pacino on the other hand, was only 3 years older than Wojtowicz). In the script—i.e. in the dialogue, Sal comes across as tough—he’s always threatening to shoot the hostages—and none too bright. However, Lumet uses Cazale’s face as an exceptionally expressive vehicle, conveying a sadness and vulnerability that again let us feel for him, especially at the end, when he’s shot by the FBI agent.

**Oct. 1975   “Real Dog Day Hero Tells His Story”**

It’s at this point in the narrative that we have to return to the real Sonny, John Wojtowicz, who while incarcerated in the Federal Penitentiary at Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, managed to convince the prison administration to screen *Dog Day Afternoon* for his fellow inmates shortly after it was released. Soon thereafter, he wrote a piece for the New York Times Arts and Leisure section in which he a) provided a film review of what he called ‘my movie’, praising the acting and directing, and calling it ‘a very moving experience’; b) at the same time criticized it as a ‘piece of garbage’, claiming its content to be only 30% true; and c) gave his version of the story, filling in the details. He noted that he had received money from Warner Brothers for the rights to his story, as well as 1% of the film’s potential profits. Also, Wojtowicz provided some background for the robbery’s motivation. A few days prior to the robbery, Ernest had tried to commit suicide because they couldn’t afford a sex change operation for him, and had been committed to a psychiatric ward. He stated that he committed the robbery “to save the life of someone he loved a great deal.” In addition, Wojtowicz corrected the film’s depictions of his wife Carmen (“The actress is an ugly and greasy looking woman with a big mouth when in real life my wife is beautiful.”). And he focused on the film’s allusion to his putative betrayal of Sal to the FBI, stringently denying that he would ever do such a thing,



and implying that this 'lie' produced some uncomfortable moments for him amongst the other inmates of the prison.

When the 'Times' editor rejected the piece ("I don't believe you have profoundly come to grips with the motives for your crime."), Wojtowicz sent it along with the rejection letter to *Gay Sunshine: A Journal of Gay Liberation*, where it was published in issue 29/30, Summer/Fall 1976. A year later, it was republished in the film journal *Jump Cut* n° 15, 1977.

### 1999 Pierre Huyghe *The Third Memory* 9 minutes 32 seconds

Twenty-seven years after the robbery, the French artist Pierre Huyghe created a 2 channel video art installation that takes *Dog Day Afternoon* as its starting point in an investigation of mediated memory i.e. how the memory of an event can be so influenced by media representations of that event that the reality can't be separated from its fictionalized representation.<sup>9</sup> Rather than tell the story of the bank robbery, as did *Dog Day Afternoon*, Huyghe's conceit is to show us a reenactment of it, with actors and basic sets, but with some modifications which take it beyond the mere docudrama kind of reenactment. First, and foremost, is the fact that John Wojtowicz plays himself. We see a portly grey haired man in his mid-fifties walking through the set of the bank's interior, rifle in hand, directing the reenactment, telling the actors what to say and do, and at the same time, on the other screen, directly addressing us the viewers, explaining how he's correcting the filmed version of his story. "I'm the real Sonny Wortzik. I'm the one you see in *Dog Day Afternoon*," he says, thereby emphatically participating in the conflation of and confusion—his and ours—between the real John Wojtowicz and the fictional Sonny Wortzik. To further complicate things, Wojtowicz informs us that the day before the bank robbery, he, Sal and Bobby Westenberg (the third would-be robber who fled the bank before the robbery began), had gone to see *The Godfather*, on its initial release—the intention being, as he puts it, "to inspire the troops", and that their stickup note, moreover, was a quote from the film: "I'm going to make you an offer you can't refuse." signed "The gang", he adds. And even more to the point, a few minutes later, when describing a confrontation with the police, Wojtowicz explains: "In the real movie, the cops fire on us and we have to shoot back at them." There is no exchange of gunplay in Lumet's film. What 'the real movie' is, thus, at this point is impossible to determine—but it's definitely Wojtowicz's production.

Another trope is that Huyghe's sets are strategically basic. In other words, they offer enough information for us to read them as 'bank interior', for example, but not enough to be taken as 'realistic'. Similarly, the actors bear some resemblance to the film's actors, but just enough for us to make the connection, for example, that the long-haired man is supposed to be Sal. And when (eventually) the camera pulls back to reveal a production crew shooting the scene and/or the studio space in front of the set where the crew is

located, we are in Brecht territory. With the artful artifice of the set, crew and actors thus exposed, we are denied the illusion of believing that this could be anything more than a stand-in for the 'real'.

For much of *The Third Memory*, the 2 screens that we are watching depict the same scene, but from different angles and camera distances. However, there are 2 occasions—the initial holdup, and the 'opening the bank vault' scene—when 1 screen depicts a scene from *Dog Day Afternoon*, with Al Pacino as Sonny, and the other screen shows Wojtowicz 'as Sonny', reenacting that same scene with adjustments for his rectified version. So what we are actually looking at is a representation that is self-consciously artificial (the art film) of a representation that is seamlessly realistic (the commercial film). Interestingly enough, there is only one instance where the actual soundtrack from *Dog Day Afternoon* is used; otherwise, it is soundless—the 'wrong' dialogue of the commercial film replaced with the corrected one of the art film.

Wojtowicz narrates his version of the events, changing some details, (Sal was carrying grenades; the FBI remove Sal to a van where they shoot him in the stomach), and adding a great deal of colourful dialogue, some humorous, some threatening, some both, as in an exchange he has with a cop who calls him a lousy cocksucker, to which Wojtowicz replies that he's not a lousy cocksucker, he's a good cocksucker.

*The Third Memory* ends with a 27 second video clip of the 1972 bank robbery—not the ABC version, but a different one, in colour, with Wojtowicz, outside the Brooklyn bank, gesturing and yelling to the police to move back. As in *Dog Day Afternoon* and *The Third Memory*, he repeatedly orders them to put down their 'fucking' guns—dialogue we did not hear transmitted on the broadcast news report. The young Wojtowicz is so like Al Pacino's Sonny in appearance, actions and even voice that it comes as a shock to realize that we're actually watching the real historical figure in the real historical event, not the charismatic actor in the fictional recreation. This leaves us perilously close to where Huyghe's claims Wojtowicz was: unable to know the difference between the real event and the fictional one. Wojtowicz, because he has "appropriated his own story" to the extent that the 'original' no longer exists.

### 2013 Allison Berg and Frank Keraudren *The Dog* 100 minutes

Wojtowicz's pathology of 'self-appropriation' is reiterated in and reaffirmed by the filmmakers Allison Berg and Frank Keraudren in *The Dog*, a documentary film screened at TIFF 2013. Begun on a whim in 2002, after watching *Dog Day Afternoon* and being charmed by Pacino's Sonny Wortzik—"You fall in love with the character even though you shouldn't ... he's the perfect anti-hero"<sup>10</sup>—they mistakenly thought that the real Sonny was about to be released from his 20 year prison sentence. Nevertheless, upon finding out about his (much) earlier release, they managed



to track Wojtowicz down by contacting his mother, from whom they got his phone number. After a telephone conversation right out of a B movie—the male voice on the other end of the phone asked them to give a password, unknown to them, but which turned out to be “The Dog”, the name with which Wojtowicz now self-identified—they met with him at a bar where he talked non-stop for the next 8 hours.<sup>11</sup> Over the next ten years, Berg and Keraudren worked on their film off and on, amassing supplementary material including photographs, obscure film and video footage, and interviews to augment *The Dog*’s first-person on-camera narration of the events of his life before and after the robbery. In the film, which is not structured in a strict chronology, the present-day Wojtowicz is clearly seen to transform from the chubby somewhat impish figure of 2002 (as he looked and acted in *The Third Memory*) to a gaunt and frail individual who was dying of cancer.<sup>12</sup>

This shift in our perception of his physical appearance can be said to be mirrored in the way in which our attitude towards the real John Wojtowicz shifts once we get to disentangle him from the fictional Sonny Wortzik. *The Dog* starts off with us seeing him as a charming larger-than-life character who has an interesting story to tell, given we’ve all seen *Dog Day Afternoon* and loved Al Pacino/Sonny Wortzik, so more of the story is what we’re waiting to hear. At first much of it is amusing or amazing; e.g. the revelation (and photo to prove it) that, after his release from prison, Wojtowicz would stand outside the Brooklyn bank in a t-shirt that read “I robbed this bank”, and sold his autograph to those onlookers for whom he had become a celebrity. The problem with the film though, is that over the course of the documentary, the more we find out, the more horrified we become; the charming uncensored naïve “Sonny” gradually turns before our very eyes into the egotistical sex-obsessed blowhard “John”, who’s blithely unaware of the effect his actions had/have on other people. Even those revelations that should be admirable lose their power to impress once we find out the truth. A good example is the surprising new information that he was a member of the Gay Activists Alliance, an association that came about as a response to the Stonewall riots in 1969 when gays were being targeted by the NYPD. Not only did he attend meetings and plan demonstrations at this early point in the Gay Lib movement, but his 1971 marriage to Ernest Aron was considered a test case for gay rights, although it did cause a lot of controversy amongst the movement as many thought that marriage was not an institution they wanted to liberate. One former member reminisces that Wojtowicz became an embarrassment to the GAA, with most disowning him as a serious activist. He was the kind of guy, we’re told, that when his name came up in conversation, everyone laughed.

It becomes evident that Wojtowicz wasn’t in the political movement as an altruistic actor; his sexual politics were strictly personal, framed by his need to get as much sex as possible. Much of his life, as with much of his language, is about fucking, one way or another. His most commonly

repeated phrases are: “Fuck you”, and “I’m going to fuck you”. There seem to be none of the censoring mechanisms or self-awareness that adults are supposed to have. Moreover, he constantly alludes to the fact that he doesn’t care what others think—that he does what he wants to do, no matter the consequences. For me, the most offputting revelation occurred when he’s boasting about what happened the night before the robbery, after the viewing of the Coppola film. He recounts how he decided that what he most wanted to do was fuck Bobby, the third robber, who was almost 10 years younger. He admits that Bobby was unwilling and resisted, but that Wojtowicz did it anyway, ignoring the youth’s wishes. When finished, he then passed him over to Sal, who also fucked him—all this blithely tossed off as part of his shtick, which at this point is no longer endearing. Needless to say. It’s impossible to think of him as ‘cute’ or ‘lovable’ after this.

So, in the end, reel art trumps real life. Reel art, whether fiction film or gallery film, gives us more to think about than this real life documentary. *The Dog*, in the end, is just a barrage of events and personality traits of the sad pathetic caricature of a human being that is/was John Wojtowicz ... someone with whom we definitely don’t want to spend any more time.

## Notes

- 1 Video, ABC National News, August 23, 1972 [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)
- 2 Wojtowicz was sentenced to 20 years in prison for the crime. However, he was released in 1978 after serving only 6 years.
- 3 The title is a play on the title of a film (and Off-Broadway play) from 1970, *The Boys in the Band*, one of the earliest examples of a mainstream film about gays.
- 4 It’s ironic that Wojtowicz finally got the money to pay for the operation by selling the rights to his story to Warner Brothers for \$7500 while in prison. The operation apparently cost \$2500 at that time. After the sex change, Ernest Aron adopted the name Liz Eden.
- 5 All the names were changed in the film ... even the bank’s ... except for Sal’s.
- 6 Cf. “The Boys in the Bank” *Life* Sept. 22, 1972 vol 73 n°12 p. 69
- 7 The former title might have relegated Lumet’s film to the niche market of gay films; whereas *Dog Day Afternoon*, a more generic title, was less likely to be intentionally overlooked by a heterosexual audience.
- 8 The fact that Wojtowicz acquired/appropriated the nickname “The Dog” after the film was screened at the prison speaks further to the conflation of fiction and reality in his story—especially as the name was abstracted from its actual meaning in the title.
- 9 There are in fact 2 versions of *The Third Memory*. The one I saw at the Guggenheim in 2002 consisted solely of the 9 minute 32 second film projected on the wall of a small darkened room. However its initial presentation at the Pompidou in 2000 (and elsewhere since) took up 2 rooms: 1 with the projected film; the other staged with additional pertinent material—13 inkjet prints of posters and press clippings, and a monitor playing a single channel 22 minute video of the Jeanne Parr TV show (CBS) from January 25 1978, with interviews of Liz Eden/Ernest Aron and Wojtowicz, newly released from prison.
- 10 “NYFF51: Allison Berg and Frank Keraudren/‘The Dog’ Red Carpet” posted Nov 8 2013 [youtube.com](http://youtube.com)
- 11 In contrast to his cooperation with Berg and Keraudren, Wojtowicz refused to have anything to do with Walter Stokman, a Dutch filmmaker also fascinated with the real events behind *Dog Day Afternoon*, and whose interest overlapped timewise with Berg and Keraudren’s. Stokman was unwilling or unable to pay Wojtowicz the amount he demanded for his cooperation, but completed the film anyways, releasing the documentary, *Based on a True Story*, in 2006 (which I haven’t been able to see).
- 12 While he died in 2006, the film was not completed for another 7 years—due to the part-time nature of the filmmakers’ work and the massive amount of material collected that needed editing down.



# Claude Lanzmann's *The Last of the Unjust*

BY FLORENCE JACOBOWITZ

Claude Lanzmann's latest film, *The Last of the Unjust*, is based on footage shot in 1975, as part of his research for his monumental film *Shoah*. It consists of a series of interviews Lanzmann conducted with the only surviving member of a Jewish Council/*Judenrät* to survive the war. Lanzmann's insistence to attain testimony from last surviving witnesses, like that of a member of the *Sonderkommando* (the inmates forced to work in the gas chambers), is central to his act of vivifying memory as testimony. In *Shoah*, Lanzmann as *metteur-en-scène* recreates the circumstances that will stimulate memory, witnessed at a time of trauma or incomprehension, to surface. It is a strategy to recover what might be buried or lost, and it becomes both an act of restoration as well as resistance to the Nazi's policy of masking and dissimulation. In this way, Lanzmann fills in an absence as an act of resistance to erasure, and a means to elicit and draw forth testimony, thus ensuring its survival. It is Lanzmann, the director as artist and activist, who combines words and images, giving the raw material form and meaning. The choice of present-day locations edited against personal testimony stimulates the viewer's imagination and invites a new way of perceiving the presentness of what still reverberates. Like *Shoah*, *The Last of the Unjust* acts as a memorial site in the way a synagogue wall of remembrance does, inscribing and preserving what might otherwise remain eradicated and lost.

*The Last of the Unjust* raises the dilemma of the Jewish Council members who were condemned after the war, most famously by Jewish intelligentsia like Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem (Lanzmann claims that even the historian Raoul Hilberg viewed Jewish Council members such as the Chairman of the Warsaw Ghetto, Adam Czerniakow, as collaborators, and had to be convinced to read from his diary in *Shoah*) who interpret their role as mediators as collaboration. While there were a broad range of Council members who had distinct personalities and motives, (for example, the tormented Adam Cziernakow from Warsaw as opposed to the dictatorial Chaim Rumkowski from Lodz) Lanzmann's film challenges the charge that they were collaborators sharing an ideology with their oppressors as did the French, for example, who willfully collaborated with their occupiers. He instead revisits the impossible problem of preserving the survival of a community faced by a Council Chairman like Benjamin Murmelstein. During his tenure at Theresienstadt, Murmelstein was responsible



for such tasks as preparing the lists of Jews for deportation to the East, cutting food supplies, increasing work hours, and keeping the ghetto running and necessary. By his own admission, he was mean, a big mouth and generally disliked by the Jewish inmates. Murmelstein is a fascinating interviewee because he is smart, erudite, and honest, as Lanzmann notes, "he does not lie". Murmelstein presents the difficulties of the situation without minimizing the terrible contradictions that informed his position of deadening the blows between what Murmelstein describes as "the hammer and anvil", illuminating what Primo Levi called "the gray zone", a realm immune from categorical moral judgments, in which Murmelstein both saved lives and earned the hatred and animosity of his constituents. At one point in the interview Murmelstein refers to himself as 'the last of the unjust', alluding to André Schwarz-Bart's novel *The Last of the Just* published in 1959, which follows a succession of righteous Jews through several generations of a family, culminating in Auschwitz. Drawing on a Jewish tradition, the novel is informed by the idea that the righteousness of certain hidden Jews in every generation ensures the continued existence of humankind. Murmelstein's inversion of the title captures the quandaries surrounding the *Judenrät*; his unusual survival (his two predecessors at Theresienstadt were killed) sets him apart and leaves him vulnerable to the suspicions of collaboration. Murmelstein claims that his motivation ultimately was to save lives, his own included, and in fact his skills managed to keep the ghetto running until near the end of the war.

Murmelstein asserts he survived to bear witness to Theresienstadt (likening himself to the one princess in *One Thousand and One Nights* who survives to tell her tale) but also to Eichmann with whom he dealt with over several years, and to his vicious determination and devotion to the eradication of European Jewry, beginning with his plans for 'resettlement' at their expense in 1938, enriching himself along the way through emigration taxes, the selling of retirement flats, transportation fees etc. Murmelstein's lucid testimony acts as an antidote to the popular reduction of Arendt's concept of the banality of evil, and her condemnation of the *Judenrät*, that risks equating their activities with Eichmann's under the rubric of bureaucratized violence



(a notable problem in Margarethe von Trotta's *Hannah Arendt*, 2012, which highlights Arendt's marginalization because of this). As Marmelstein ironically points out, Scholem was against hanging Eichmann but not him. "He was a demon, anything but banal" Marmelstein insists in describing Eichmann, and it is chilling in the way he challenges convincingly the almost benign way Eichmann has come to be perceived.

Although in *Shoah* Lanzmann revives Czerwinski's words as a Jewish Council 'Elder' posthumously through his diary, to challenge the selective live testimony of Franz Grassler, a Deputy to the Nazi Commissioner of the Warsaw Ghetto, the presentation of Marmelstein's defense deserves to be treated separately and Lanzmann was right to exclude it from *Shoah*. Both films share certain concerns: they challenge the analogy of the victims as 'sheep to the slaughter', demonstrating the impossibility of resistance outside of very specific circumstances, further compounded by the Nazis use of coercion and deception. *Shoah*, however, focuses on the process of killing and the film communicates the disastrous inevitability that resulted. *The Last of the Unjust*, however, defends the idea that Marmelstein presents regarding his role: "people are right to condemn me but are not competent to judge me". He may have done dubious things to negotiate survival but Marmelstein does accomplish a form of resistance. Marmelstein's pragmatism saved over 120,000 Jews whom he helped emigrate, as well as those who survived because Theresienstadt continued to exist, and in many ways the film acknowledges his success within tragic circumstances where judgment, in hindsight, becomes impossible.

Marmelstein's testimony begins before the Anschluss/annexation of Austria, when he is summoned in 1938, as one of the chief Rabbis of a large district in pre-war Vienna to aid Eichmann in his schemes of 'resettlement'. A large portion, however, consists of his testimony as last Chairman of the Theresienstadt model ghetto, the ghetto "as if" as Marmelstein calls it, a "wolf in sheep's clothing" staged to give the semblance of normalcy and fool the world, a lie that the Swiss inspector from the Red Cross, Maurice Rossel, happily bought into when he visited in 1944 (which is explored in Lanzmann's *A Visitor From The Living*, 1997). Theresienstadt housed a number of artists, musicians, writers and actors and later, elderly transports of German Jews who thought they were buying a place in a relocation site akin to a thermal spa town, instead of internment in a concentration camp. Marmelstein's role was to 'embellish', participate in the deceit in order to ensure its value as a smokescreen, which postponed the ultimate deportation of the inmates to their death.

In *Shoah*, Lanzmann avoids using archival testimony to corroborate past events, relying instead on the testimony that emerges in the present as a means of emphasizing its timelessness. In *The Last of the Unjust*, drawings

from inmates like Fritz Lederer who buried their works during the war, are summoned to act as testimony much as reading from Czerniakow's diary does in *Shoah*; the drawings contest the presentation of Theresienstadt as a spa town, for example, in an image that documents the dead, piled up and carried off in wagons. Excerpts from the Nazi propaganda film, *The Führer Gives the Jews a City* (the gift of Jewish eradication Marmelstein quips) further counter points Marmelstein's description of the "false embellishments" that create a fiction of ghetto life as a cultural haven for lectures, activities etc.

Like *Shoah*, *The Last of the Unjust* is also a lament for the dead, similarly permeated by the awareness of the difficulties of collecting eyewitness testimonies to genocide with the passing of time. Lanzmann, now in his late eighties, adds another layer to the theme of temporality and memorialization central to his oeuvre. Marmelstein's interview set within the context of the mid-seventies raises the tenuousness of Lanzmann's endeavors in 2012. *The Last of the Unjust* begins with Lanzmann again revisiting the scenes of the crimes, including Nisko, Vienna, Terezin, Zazecze, beginning at the train station at Bohusovice a disembarkation point for the Jews, many of them elderly, shipped to Theresienstadt. "Who in the world today knows Bohusovice and the station?" Lanzmann asks, pointing out its location on the Prague/Dresden line. Lanzmann's preoccupation with trains and stations, evident in *Shoah*, raises the logistical challenge of how over a hundred thousand people were coerced to participate in their fraudulent incarceration in an orderly and obedient fashion. The public nature of a train station as a place where local inhabitants, railway employees are witnesses to and participants in the victims' transportation to the camp, is edited against the description of the scene of disembarkation as "an apocalyptic vision". Lanzmann's presence at the site acts as a thread that joins the reality of the place to Marmelstein's account.

In present-day Theresienstadt, Lanzmann's visual appearance as an older man slowly and painstakingly climbing the still preserved staircase to the attic where many of the elderly were lodged, reenacts what took place there. The camera follows Lanzmann slowly negotiating the stairs in real time, dramatizing the difficulties Marmelstein's testimony recounts, adding a poignancy to the tragic recollections. Other scenes at different sites similarly invite the viewer to revive events through the juxtaposition of location and retelling or quotation. For example, Lanzmann reads the words from a final public speech around the New Year given by Paul Epstein, the 'Elder' who preceded Marmelstein, near the execution wall in the camp eight days before his execution. There is also Lanzmann's description of a failed hanging of a young man at the site of the gallows, and his defiant recitation of the Kaddish, a prayer for the dead, invoking what Lanzmann describes as "a sinister place of unforgettable beauty."



Lanzmann's invitation to look back is identified by Marmelstein as a danger, compared to Eurydice's glance back in the Orpheus myth that confines her to the realm of the dead. Marmelstein, however, rises to the occasion, defending his position with conviction and gusto. He is a distinctive character—his manner of speech, his appearance, his confidence supported by a deft intelligence and caustic wit present a portrait of a man who was used to being held in high esteem, one of the 'prominenten' whom Eichmann regarded as a worthy manager. Although Marmelstein doesn't deny the allure of the power he tasted, he understands that he had no real power and that ultimately, his motivation was to help people. "Like Scheherazade, I told stories so the ghetto would survive." Describing himself alternately as a marionette pulling its own strings, or a performer who had to communicate strength because "if you showed fear all would be lost", Marmelstein lived by his pragmatic wits because, under the circumstances of a world "unhinged", one didn't have the time to contemplate the broader moral spectrum. As a response to his seeming lack of empathy he counters that he saw himself as a surgeon who can't cry over his patient. Ultimately, as the film convincingly argues, the reality is that without Marmelstein, there may have been well over a hundred thousand less Jews survive the war.

In the interview footage Lanzmann clearly enjoys Marmelstein's defense and testimony and though he challenges him from time to time—why didn't he leave when he could have? Why does he not describe Theresienstadt in the horrific details of a concentration camp? (As Lanzmann states, "One doesn't have the impression of suffering, of the thousands who died ... it was hell.") Did he not know what deported to the East meant?—he seems won over by Marmelstein's candor and clear sighted analysis of the impossible situation he was in. The tone of the final shot, of the two walking away together is almost touching, as is Lanzmann's courage to take a position against the entrenched one that condemns Council members without exception. It is another reason why this film has its own singular identity outside of *Shoah*. Which is not to say that it isn't an elegiac film. In the film's present-day frame, Lanzmann allows for long takes of a cantor singing the Kol Nidre Yom Kippur service in the synagogue that survived in Vienna, a prayer that evokes forgiveness and a leveling of disparate groups who are welcome to join together in communal worship, and one can't help but think it is, in part, for this Rabbi who ended up a pariah, exiled in Rome. Lanzmann also includes a lengthy cantorial rendition of a memorial prayer. This, coupled with shots of the names of the murdered inscribed on memorial walls in synagogues in Prague and Vienna express Lanzmann's pressing agenda to somehow undo their intended obliteration from history and memory. His originality as a filmmaker is to use the cinema to create a space that one enters and reimagines its possibility.

## Stranger by the Lake: what is love?

BY RICHARD LIPPE

Previous to seeing Alain Guiraudie's *Stranger by the Lake*, I wasn't acquainted with the writer-director's work. Judging by the film, Guiraudie is a major French director. *Stranger by the Lake*, which is a significant contribution to the contemporary gay cinema, impresses on numerous levels. In addition to its rigorous integration of style and content, it is a sensual, intelligent, elegant and humanistic piece of filmmaking. That the film won the best director prize in this year's Un Certain Regarde section at the Cannes Film Festival illustrates the jury's excellent taste.

*Stranger by the Lake's* strength is in part due to its careful construction as a psychological thriller. The narrative takes place over a ten day period on an isolated stretch of a male cruising beach and features three principal characters. The central protagonist is Franck/Pierre Deladonchamps, a handsome youngish man who develops a friendship with an older heterosexual man, Henri/Patrick d'Assunção, and falls in love with an Adonis-like gay man Michel/Christophe Paou. Franck's immediate attraction to Michel quickly becomes a commitment that would normally demand a more gradual development but the film's concentration on their intense physical relationship gives conviction to his reaction.

The narrative pivots on the consequences of Franck's desire for Michel who, when first seen, is with a young man who appears to be his lover. Franck follows the two men when they go into a wooded area directly behind the beach. When Franck passes by as they are having sex, Michel smiles at him, suggesting a mutual attraction, but Franck feels dejected, telling Henri later that the men whom he likes are always taken. On the second day, Franck again watches them and continues to do so as the others leave the beach when dusk approaches. Franck, partially obscured by trees, is positioned above the lake as Michel and the man swim out into the water. What first appears to be play, gradually becomes a struggle and Franck watches Michel drown his lover. The next eight days deal with their relationship, Franck's growing friendship with Henri and the intrusion of a police inspector when the body is discovered. By the film's conclusion, Michel has killed both Henri and the inspector and the future of Franck and Michel's relationship is left open-ended.

The film's formal structure is based on precision and repetition. It begins each day with a shot of the parking area and Franck's arrival and concludes with a shot of his departure at day's end. This device contains the narrative's action within an enclosed space that has its own





*Stranger by the Lake*

identity. While the space is confined, it is a natural setting and the film is attuned to its visual beauty, the sun, the water, the beach, the trees, and the sky. Guiraudie also uses sound, but not background music, to enhance the setting, cutting for instance to an image of the sky while we hear the sound of wind blowing through trees. The space becomes tactile and produces a sensuality that is conducive to the men's nakedness and the sexual desire that motivates their presence on the beach. Utilizing the film's widescreen format, cinematographer Claire Mathon employs long takes and graceful camera movements to enhance Guiraudie's *mise-en-scène* and characterizations, thereby creating an intimacy that is both physically and emotionally charged.

While not directly serving as a viewer identification figure, Franck is the character with whom we are aligned to from the film's beginning to end. In addition to having an attractive slim build, he has an accessible and vulnerable presence. Franck is also the film's most sensitive character. This is illustrated by his almost immediate responsiveness to Henri who, like him, is lonely and looking for human contact. Franck's empathy for the outsider is similarly shown in an encounter with a solid looking, middle-aged man who bluntly approaches, him wanting sexual contact. He declines several offers although eventually agrees to receive a blow job which clearly doesn't engage him. In contrast, Franck's strong attraction to Michel is clearly evident. The credibility of Franck's reaction to Michel is in great part due to the nuance and sincerity of Deladonchamps's performance. The actor provides Franck with a romantic sensibility that heightens his physical attraction to Michel. Deladonchamps communicates an intelligence that makes the character's behaviour understandable even when Franck himself becomes uncertain regarding his feelings about Michel. Although Franck tends to act on impulse as when he doesn't report the murder (perhaps he unconsciously feels relief that his rival has been eliminated), he doesn't totally relinquish a moral grounding; if he did, the film would become cynical and its ending would be less effective.

Henri, although giving an impression of being

accepting of his female partner's abandonment, is suffering from a severe sense of loss. This is established early on in his meeting with Franck and leads to an emotional connection that develops between them and leads to a caring friendship. Henri, in an attempt to save Franck from the possibility of being murdered by Michel, sacrifices his life when he confronts Michel with the drowning of his previous partner. At a TIFF public screening of the film, Deladonchamps was present to do to a Q&A. When asked about Patrick d'Assunção's Henri, he said the character is in a state of despair, "thinking about death" and "seeks a motive to be alive." In addition, he praised the actor's performance and commented on the pleasure of working with him. Although the character isn't easily accessible or particularly engaging, d'Assunção gradually creates a sympathetic character who is affecting in his humanity.

In contrast to Franck and Henri, Michel is ultimately an unknowable character. With his traditional handsomeness and physical perfection, Michel can be considered a masculine ideal and, initially, he is direct and gives the impression of being open. As his involvement with Franck develops, it becomes evident that he is defensive about his privacy and discourages any attempts on Franck's part to develop a relationship outside of the confines of the beach. He suggests that the sexual intensity of their love making can't be sustained and a serious relationship is unlikely as they will soon tire of each other. Earlier, after drowning his partner in a long take shot that last several minutes, Michel swims to the shore and calmly dresses, without displaying any emotional reaction. Paou brings exactly the right degree of elusiveness to his performance by being alternately charming, self-contained, and threatening.

The film is cautious about offering an explanation regarding Michel's psychotic condition. One can speculate that he is closeted and fears being exposed gay; or that his behaviour is triggered when being subjected to what he perceives to be an extreme threat such as the demands of a no-longer-wanted lover, Henri's knowledge of the killing, and the inspector's probing questions.



Guiraudie, by not offering an explanation for Michel's mental state, makes him something other than a conventional villain. It also allows for the ambiguity of the film's ending: Franck, after witnessing Henri's and the inspector's deaths, flees from Michel, fearing for his life despite the latter's claim that he won't harm him; but, later, as darkness begins to descend, he pleadingly calls out for him. In these scenes there is the suggestion that Michel has accepted his love for Franck as he calls out "show yourself"; "I won't hurt you"; "Don't leave me. I need you." Deladochamps, in the Q&A, said two endings were shot, the present ending and an ending in which Michel returns and he and Franck leave together.

Not to be over-looked, Inspector Damroder/Jérôme Chappatte, a heterosexual, is introduced into the narrative without fanfare. Middle-aged, reserved, frail looking and an intellectual, he approaches the murder investigation in an academic manner. With his dry presence and reasoned thinking, he is incongruous in a milieu that is permeated by physical, sexual and emotional energy; at one point, he makes a passing comment that questions the moral standards of gay people, given that the murder wasn't reported earlier. While the film has its moments of humour, the inspector doesn't function as a comic relief figure. Restricted to periodically brief and unexpected appearances, he isn't sufficiently integrated into the film to be a major presence. Still, his death like that of Michel's initial lover and Henri's also comes as a shock.

*Stranger by the Lake* has received attention because of the nudity of the two leading actors and other cast members who spend a lot of screen time naked. But it doesn't take long before their nakedness ceases to become a distraction. Even more controversial, the film features two explicit sex scenes, one in which Franck ejaculates on screen and the other in which he gives Michel a blow job. The explicit sexual acts were performed by body doubles who are similar in looks and build to the actors so that the love-making between them is credible, not merely a matter of disengaged sex. In addition, because Deladochamps and Paou are so completely in character, the sex scenes become a natural extension of their screen identities. In an interview with Guiraudie by João Pedro Rodrigues in *cinema scope*<sup>1</sup>, the director discusses his concern that these scenes not be pornographic. Rather than being perfunctory, the scenes are sensual and erotic and express the intimate pleasure and tenderness both men experience during their love making. This sensuality is enhanced by the beauty of the natural surroundings, the lush greenery and the pervasive sunlight. Arguably, it takes a French director to make such an uninhibited film about gay sex. It's difficult to imagine an American film containing similar imagery.

By integrating, with seeming effortlessness, explicit gay sex scenes into a fictional narrative, Guiraudie challenges the notion that they will offend a mainstream audience which, as is well-known, will much more readily

accept lesbian sex.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, *Stranger by the Lake* is a film that is populated almost completely with homosexual men, many of whom are seeking physical pleasure. Guiraudie's familiarity with gay life and his regard for his characters and their identities gives the film authenticity. The film doesn't distance itself from its subject matter and avoids being judgmental or moralistic. To fault *Stranger by the Lake* as lacking an ethical position because Franck doesn't report Michel's killing of his lover would be to misunderstand its concerns. The film is a study of human needs and choices that aren't found within the dictates of reason or legality.

As a thriller, *Stranger by the Lake* evokes the Claude Chabrol films that similarly deal with characters who are motivated by powerful emotional needs they love, hate, the fear of loneliness and in their obsession transgress what is considered 'normal' behaviour. In the course of the Deldonchamps's Q&A, he said Guiraudie told the actors to think of the film as a Hitchcock movie. Like these two masters, Guiraudie is concerned with personal needs as much as he is with his characters' external actions. In addition, as a thriller, the film's controlled pacing rigorously builds suspense as the narrative evolves and moves towards its conclusion.

In the *Cinema Scope* interview, Guiraudie says: "I wanted to do a romantic film, something between love and death." Franck's nature is such that he fully commits himself to his lover and, if need be, is willing to risk his life. Guiraudie points to the scene in which Franck asks Michel if he can penetrate him without using a condom. Equally, Franck, after becoming concerned that Michel might have realized that he witnessed the drowning, decides, after hesitating, to accept Michel's invitation to join him for a swim at dusk on an otherwise deserted beach. One can accept Franck's concept of love or not but the film respects it.

In the last several years, there have been a number of films—Clint Eastwood's *J. Edgar* with a screenplay by Dustin Lance Black, Ira Sachs' *Keep the Lights On*, Steven Soderbergh's *Behind the Candelabra* and now *Stranger by the Lake*—that depict gay life as both physically and emotionally complex. Let's hope the gay cinema will continue to develop in this direction. Guiraudie's film is an audacious step forward.

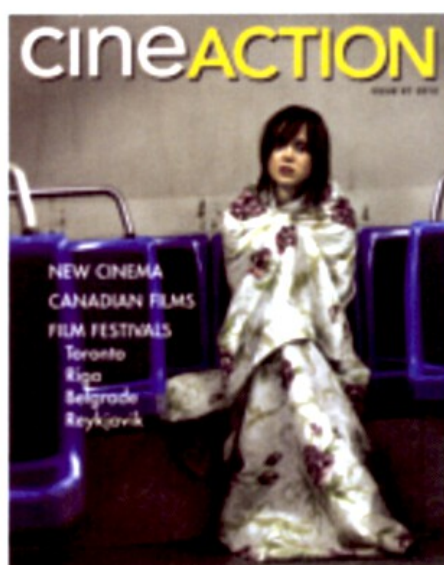
## Notes

- 1 "Sex, Death, and Geometry: A Conversation Between Alain Guiraudie and João Pedro Rodrigues on *L'inconnu du lac*". *Cinema Scope*, Issue 55 Summer 2013 pp. 33-37. This is an excellent interview in which Guiraudie speaks in detail about the choices he made in the conception and shooting of the film.
- 2 The screening took place in a TIFF theatre seating more than 500 people. There were no disruptive viewer reactions because of the nudity nor did the explicit sex scenes cause walk outs.

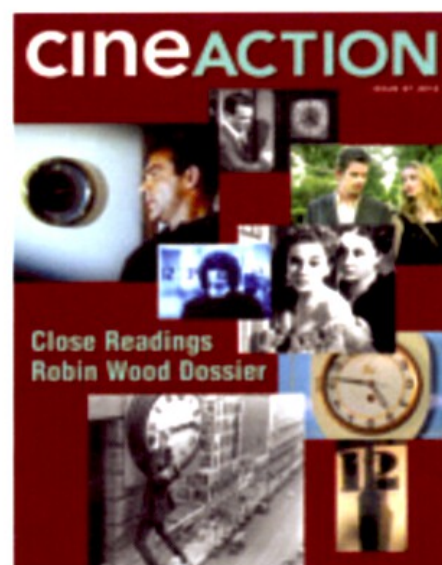


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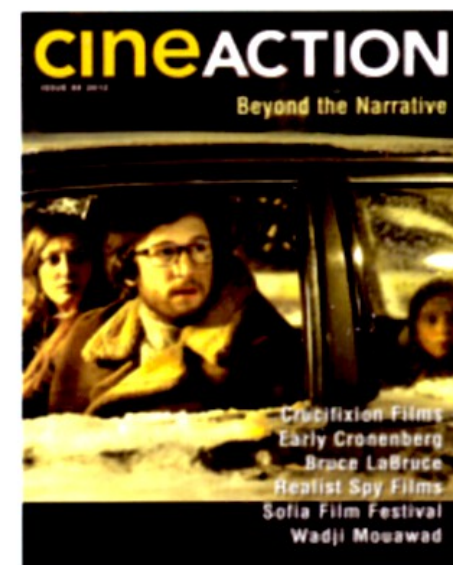
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